



OVERLORD 9 The Caster of Destruction Kugane Maruyama
Illustration by so-bin

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

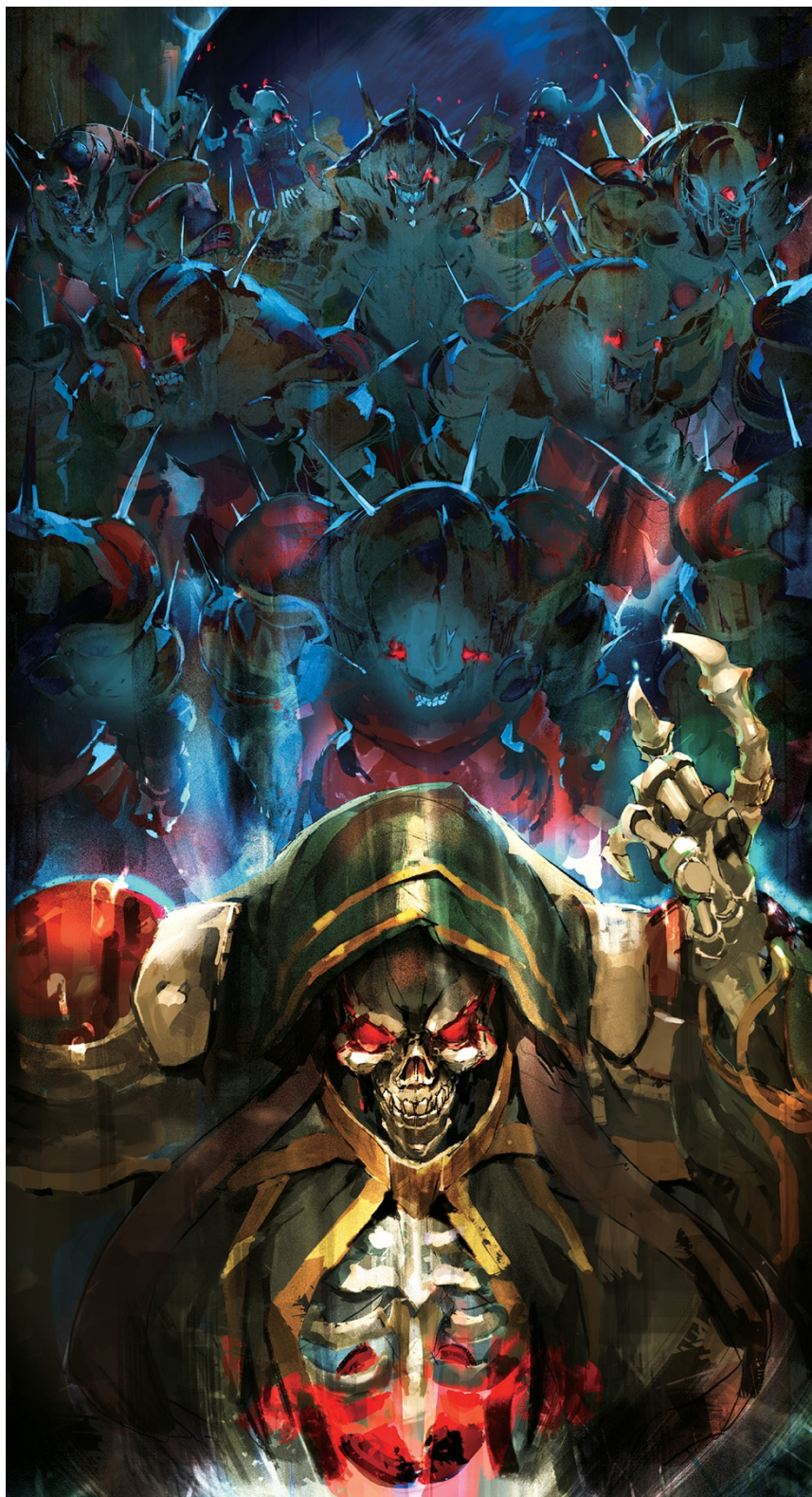


OVERLORD

9

The Caster of
Destruction

Kugane Maruyama
Illustration by so-bin





OVERLORD

Volume 9: The Caster of Destruction

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin



Copyright

OVERLORD, VOLUME 9
KUGANE MARUYAMA

Translation by Emily Balistrieri
Cover art by so-bin

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

©Kugane Maruyama 2015

First published in Japan in 2015 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo, through Tuttle-Mori Agency, Inc., Tokyo.

English translation © 2019 by Yen Press, LLC

Yen Press, LLC supports the right to free expression and the value of copyright. The purpose of copyright is to encourage writers and artists to produce the creative works that enrich our culture.

The scanning, uploading, and distribution of this book without permission is a theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like permission to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), please contact the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
1290 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10104

Visit us at yenpress.com
facebook.com/yenpress
twitter.com/yenpress
yenpress.tumblr.com
instagram.com/yenpress

First Yen On Edition: January 2019

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.

The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Maruyama, Kugane, author. | So-bin, illustrator. | Balistrieri, Emily, translator.

Title: Overlord / Kugane Maruyama ; illustration by So-bin ; translation by Emily Balistrieri.

Other titles: Ōbārōdo. English

Description: First Yen On edition. | New York, NY : Yen On, 2016–

Identifiers: LCCN 2016000142 | ISBN 9780316272247 (v. 1 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316363914 (v. 2 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316363938 (v. 3 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316397599 (v. 4 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316397612 (v. 5 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398794 (v. 6 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398817 (v. 7 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398848 (v. 8 : hardback) | ISBN 9780316398862 (v. 9 : hardback)

Subjects: LCSH: Alternate reality games—Fiction. | Internet games—Fiction. | Science fiction. | BISAC: FICTION / Science Fiction / Adventure.

Classification: LCC PL873.A37 O2313 2016 | DDC 895.63/6—dc23

LC record available at <http://lcn.loc.gov/2016000142>

ISBNs: 978-0-316-39886-2 (hardcover)

978-0-316-39887-9 (ebook)

E3-20181215-JV-NF-ORI

Contents

Cover

Insert

Title Page

Copyright

Prologue

Chapter 1 Verbal Warfare

Chapter 2 Preparations for the Battle

Chapter 3 Another Battle

Chapter 4 Massacre

Epilogue

A Brand-new Chapter

Character Profiles

Afterword

Yen Newsletter

Prologue

Prologue

Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix, unrivaled sovereign of the empire, the young man feared as “the Fresh Blood Emperor,” examined his acting for errors.

He was confident his bearing and smile had made a good impression. There were no problems.

Nobles had a way with that sort of psychological manipulation. As the emperor, Jircniv had these teachings pounded into him since he had first become aware of the world around him, so his mastery was great enough that no one could see through his facade at a glance. To his guests, he should have appeared as nothing more than a friendly young man.

It was important to put guests at ease.

Observing the mind of someone wrapped in robes of suspicion was difficult, but by tugging the threads of trust and goodwill, those layers could be removed one by one until their heart was laid bare. Naturally, he skillfully hid all his machinations beneath the smile of a gentleman who wholeheartedly welcomed the arrival of his guests.

He was currently receiving two dark elves who had barged into the imperial castle riding a dragon. He had never met anyone whose appearance matched their true power so poorly.

The death toll from the fissures the girl with the staff had caused was 117. That included forty Imperial Guards, sixty knights, eight arcane casters, eight faith casters, plus one more—a shocking loss.

As the knights were the ones protecting the palace, they were elite, but losing them was possible to ignore. In adventurer terms, they were silver rank. The next generation was receiving a complete education, so he had no doubt more knights of their level would appear.

Next came the guards. They were the cream of the crop, cultivated with an eye on the empire’s future. It stung to lose half his gold-rank equivalents all at once. On top of that, they had been clad in magic armor that had taken a great deal of time for the many Ministry of Magic casters mobilized for the purpose to make. Those suits of armor

were worth more than their weight in gold.

What hurt the most, though, was the loss of the last person—one of the strongest knights in the empire, Unshakable Nazami Eneck. He said he was simply mimicking a warrior he had seen once, but his defense-oriented style of fighting with a two-handed shield made him known as the toughest knight, even compared to the four strongest.

At the point where an individual's valor surpassed a hundred soldiers', simply saying that the death of an immensely powerful warrior was a loss wouldn't cut it. It was entirely possible that the empire's military might have taken a precipitous drop.

Honestly, Jircniv wanted to douse these dark elves in water or something and chase them away, but he wasn't about to believe that would work on these killers. He wasn't sure if they had come with the purpose of giving a demonstration of their power, but his only choice was to welcome them with a smile.

He wasn't going to let them have the upper hand entirely, however. Jircniv watched every move the *children* in front of him made.

One could learn so much from the most minute details.

Jircniv's senses were so keen he had once discerned that a noble loyal to him and a hostile noble were secretly plotting together from nothing more than the smell of the same spice in the air. He took a close look to see if he could notice anything.

Clothes...

Looks...

Hmm...

These messengers from Ainz Ooal Gown, the dark elves who had barged into his palace, had extremely pleasant features and would no doubt fascinate the opposite sex in the future.

Those skinny little bodies, all those faces they're making... No matter how you look at them, they're just kids. Anyone who didn't understand the situation would grin awkwardly if they were told that these two are messengers.

The qualifications for envoys responsible for a country—diplomats—were many and varied, and appearance was critical. Representatives who didn't look the part could cause trouble for their homeland.

Ainz Ooal Gown should know that much, so why did he send these dark elves, who would be so easy to make light of?

Jircniv spun the gears of his brain into motion.

What comes to mind is...a demonstration. He knew we would underestimate them, and that would give him a way to show us a bit of his power. The larger the gap from the impression they make, the greater the shock we'd feel...but then wouldn't riding in on a dragon have the opposite effect? A dragon is pretty impressive... Or were these two the only ones

who would make good messengers? Or is there some other reason...? Shit. I can't tell what his aim is. I don't have enough information.

Several ideas came to mind but left just as quickly.

For starters, I need to prioritize gathering information about this Ainz Ooal Gown. I won't get anywhere without that. Then I'll need to study how far he can be pushed, taking care not to upset him. Only a fool ruins negotiations by angering the other party.

First, he needed to learn why they had come.

The pair of dark elves had declared, "The emperor sent some rude guys to the Great Tomb of Nazarick," and committed the atrocity of killing over a hundred people in the courtyard, but he needed to know if that was based on actual intelligence or if they were trying to bait him.

Considering the timing, the "rude guys" probably referred to the workers. In that case, there was no mistake about it being Jircniv who gave the order to send them in, but he had used a method with so many layers of conspiracy that not even the *J* of his name would get out.

How had they—? How had Ainz Ooal Gown seen through his plot? His attitude would change depending on the answer.

Since they said they've come as messengers, this could be a chance to get some information out of them. I've got to keep my eye on even the slightest moves they make and figure out what they're after...

Their patron was someone who wouldn't hesitate to barge into a country and use his power to threaten its ruler. One misreading could end in death.

Jircniv wasn't interested in any more earthquakes.

He turned his focus to the room next door.

Normally the adjacent room would be crammed with guards, and he would have several in this room as well, but not today. Even if there were fifty guards, the most he could expect would be regret that he got them all killed. Instead, he had only five people accompanying him.

One was Lightning Baswood Peshmel. One was the greatest caster in the empire, whom Jircniv trusted more than anyone else, Fluder Paradyne. The other three were secretaries Jircniv considered to be outstanding.

Meanwhile, he had ordered the guards to dig along the fissure scars.

He knew there was no point in recovering the bodies themselves.

No one in the empire was able to use resurrection magic. Their adamantite-plate adventurers weren't that powerful and neither were their priests. About the only nearby places home to powerful humans were the kingdom and the Theocracy.

The reason they would recover the corpses despite that was because it would be a shame to lose the magic items. Besides, recovering the bodies of his subordinates and giving them an honorable burial would be good for maintaining the soldiers' morale.

"Well, messengers. You've traveled all this way. You must be thirsty. We've also prepared a light meal, so please help yourselves if you're hungry."

Jircniv rang a handbell, and the maids standing by outside entered the room. There were nearly twenty of them, each bearing a polished silver platter. The maids were highly trained, so their movements were refined and beautiful.

Jircniv was secretly proud of their perfectly synchronized motions, but today they were just slightly out of step.

Since they were usually perfect, that tiny blemish seemed huge.

What's going on? They've served all kinds of messengers before, and this has never happened. Are they under the influence of some sort of magic?

He suppressed the urge to grab the medallion hanging around his neck under his clothes. It was effective precisely because it was secret. People knowing he had it equipped would only be a disadvantage.

Noticing the maids' gazes wavering over the two dark elves, he realized what was causing their mistakes.

Ahh, so that's what it is... The beauty of these creatures has taken their breath away. I get it...but don't embarrass me, you idiots.

Or maybe he should have praised them—faced with these two and their features, they were able to hold themselves together despite getting flustered.

The maids placed a drink and something sweet before each person, bowed, then exited the room.

"There you go."

"Hmm." The dark elf boy made an unimpressed face and lifted his glass.

It was a fine item, clear, with intricate details.

These sorts of ornate glasses weren't Jircniv's style, but he still owned a few out of necessity. The dishes used to welcome messengers were a show of a nation's power while also signifying how important the messenger was.

The dark elf boy took a sip of his drink.

No hesitation... If he's not wary of poison, does that mean he has magical defense against it? Or did he just infer that I don't have those sorts of intentions...? Could there be some other reason? Hmm, the girl didn't hesitate, either.

"It's not very good. And it doesn't seem to have any special effects, either."

For just a moment, the boy's pronouncement was a refreshing surprise.

No one ever talked to Jircniv like that. Not even when he was a child.

When the surprise faded, a bit of anger welled up. *Damn brat, don't you have any manners?* Of course, he wasn't foolish enough to let even a hint of his annoyance show.

"I'm sorry." He smiled at the boy. "If you tell me what sort of drink you like, I'll have them prepare it."

No special effects... Like poison? Was he hoping it was poisoned? What did he mean by that?

"I doubt you guys can make the sort of thing I like."

"D-don't be rude, sis."

"Hmm? Is that rude? Maybe..."

Sis? So she's a girl, not a boy? I guess they're sisters, then?

Once he'd been told she was a girl, she started to seem like one.

So why...is she dressed like a boy...? Well, it's probably easier to move in those clothes. Kids that age sometimes have an androgynous air about them. That one couldn't be a boy, could it? No, not with that outfit—there's no way. Plus, she seems so docile.

Jircniv wondered if he could bring the girl with the staff over to his side or use her as a mediator to give the empire an advantage, but since he didn't have enough information about her, he couldn't think of any good ways to make that happen.

For starters, it wouldn't do to forget that as meek as she looked, she had committed an atrocity. A clumsy attempt would be the same as sticking his hand in a sleeping dragon's mouth.

It all comes down to gathering info. I need to think of a way to see their hand as soon as possible.

"Now then, messengers, I gave you my name once before, but allow me to reintroduce myself. I am Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix of the Baharuth Empire. I've heard Miss Fiora's name, so might I have yours?"

"U-uh, umm, I'm Mare Bello Fiore."

"Thank you. Earlier, Miss Fiora, you said, 'Lord Ainz is not amused. So if the emperor doesn't come to say sorry, we'll destroy the country.' Does this mean I need to go to the Great Tomb of Nazarick to apologize?"

"Duh." The simple reply was given coldly.

There hadn't been any warmth in this Aura's eyes in the first place. He couldn't feel from her anything beyond what a human would feel for a bug.

Now, here's the problem.

What she was saying was true, but how far should he admit that

to be the case? And how did she find out? Normally, he would smooth talk the messenger away for now and set about gathering intelligence, but would that work against him in this case? Ultimately, he needed to figure out where the line was so he didn't accidentally cross it.

"By the way, was it Sir Ainz Ooal Gown himself who ordered you to come here?"

Aura and Mare both looked puzzled.

"Yes...but what does that have to do with anything?"

"Oh, I just wanted to confirm."

Jircniv got to thinking.

Who is Ainz Ooal Gown anyway? Dark elves, a tomb, and a dragon—it's a jumbled mess. What do they have in common?

Maybe dark elves living in the Tove Woodlands moved to the ruins on the plains? And the dragon is a monster the leader of the dark elf tribe commands?

Jircniv shook his head to clear out the speculation.

...I can let the bards spin the tales. My job is to reach an accurate conclusion based on the information I collect.

The only thing he was certain of so far was that his adversary had to have been gathering information in the empire somehow. He probably controlled quite the intelligence net—or...

Is this Ainz Ooal Gown skilled at data analysis? Then I need to check something.

"Did he order you to barge in here on a dragon?"

"Y-yes. It was Lord Ainz's order."

"Aha... I see."

"What's with all the weird questions? Are you gonna come apologize or what? If you're not, we'll go tell him you refused, then come back to destroy the country."

There was a saying that went, "Dragon eggs can only be found in dragon lairs." It meant that great achievements and success were impossible without the corresponding risk.

Jircniv followed that advice and steeled himself to take a step forward.

"Of course I'll go. I don't recall sending anyone to a place called Nazarick, but it's possible someone beneath me independently made some poor choices. As the one at the top, I must take responsibility for my subordinates' actions."

From the edge of his vision, he saw the eyes of the three secretaries widen and Fluder nodding that he had made the right choice.

"Hmm, okay. Then shall we get going?"

"Wait. I'm fine with going, but I'm the ruler of the empire. I can't up and leave the country so easily. If I could have, hmm, two or three

days”—he glanced at the messengers’ expressions and gathered that a few days’ time wouldn’t be a problem—“to clean up urgent matters, plus time to get ready and prepare a gift for Sir Gown, so maybe ten days—”

“Ten? Isn’t that kind of a lot?”

“With ten days, I should be able to put together a suitable gift. I wouldn’t want to be rude by offering something too simple. I also need time to figure out who is responsible. The empire is vast. Investigations take time.”

“A gift...?” Aura became absorbed in thought. Next to her, Mare began to look nervous.

I see... If they hesitate when they hear it’s about a gift for Gown, that means they have a healthy respect for their master. If I press them on this, I should be able to buy some more time.

Jircniv had been about to open his mouth, but Aura was a smidgen faster.

“Just kidding. Lord Ainz said to have you come immediately. He didn’t specify a time, so I’ll leave whether ‘immediately’ could mean ‘in a few days’ up to you.”

He wanted to spit on Ainz Ooal Gown for seeing through his plans. At the same time, he realized that he was up against a formidable enemy.

So he wants to see how much I’ll hurry to comply with the word immediately? Good grief, Ainz Ooal Gown. You’re a clever negotiator, too? How wise he must be to have predicted how this would play out.

“Uh, why are you so quiet?”

At the sound of Aura’s cold voice, he realized he had been lost in a maze of his thoughts.

“E-er, sorry. I was just thinking what sort of present I could give him if we didn’t have much time...”

“Hmm. Well, whatever. So will you answer my question? When will you come to the Great Tomb of Nazarick—for your audience with Lord Ainz?”

“Hmm.” He ignored Aura’s blatant provocation. “I’ll get everything ready and head over there in five days.”

“Okay. That’s what I’ll tell Lord Ainz, then. Oh, by the way, did you want us to dig up the people buried alive? Well”—she smashed her hands together with an evil smirk on her face that was not at all fitting for a child—“they’re probably flat as pancakes, or maybe more like ground beef, so they’ll be hard to recover, but...”

Jircniv smiled—because her aim was so obvious.

Humans showed their true natures when emotions were running high. She probably wanted to provoke him and see how he would react. It was a technique Jircniv himself used from time to time. In

situations like this, it was effective to betray an opponent's expectations.

“Thank you. That would be a big help.”

He smiled his first genuine smile in response to the disappointed look on Aura's face.



Chapter 1 | Verbal Warfare

1

Six splendid carriages raced across the plain.

Despite running over grass, they were surprisingly stable.

First, there were the wheels: They were a magic item called Comfortable Wheels. Not only that, the body was equipped with a magic item called Lightweight Cargo. The supremely luxurious carriage, which cost an eye-popping amount to manufacture, was drawn along by equally special creatures. They were magical beasts that resembled horses called sleipnirs.

By the time six of those were included, it became absurd to try to calculate the expenses involved.

The carriages that required more than wealth for a seat were surrounded by guards mounted on magnificent horses. There were over twenty of them, and they all wore matching gear—a mail shirt, a longsword on their hip, and a quiver of arrows plus longbow on their back.

They were all men except the woman leading them out front.

Unlike the others, she was heavily armored. She wore full plate armor and carried a sort of spear that was different from a normal knight's lance. Her visor was up, but strangely the right side of her face was covered in gold cloth.

The word *mercenaries* seemed appropriate for the armed band, but their movements and discipline gave off a different impression. Their eyes were sharp, vigilant against their surroundings.

Perhaps they looked like cowards, keeping their guard up in the middle of an open field, but in a magical world where monsters were rampant, one could never be too cautious.

Giant spiders that lurked underground forgoing both food and water, waiting patiently for their prey to pass by; impure monsters with no fixed form, swooping through the air as mist; basilisks with petrifying gazes that forced anyone who spotted them to flee, even if

they were off on the horizon... In order to be prepared to face monsters with such deadly abilities, the guards maintained a cloak of focused tension. Normal mercenaries didn't go to such lengths.

What proved more than anything else that they weren't merely hired hands were the ones who kept watch up in the sky, though they couldn't be seen. They were as invisible as if they had used a spell and flew alongside the group on the ground.

A hippogriff, born from crossbreeding a griffin and a female horse, was a magical beast that was half-eagle, half-horse. Perhaps due to their horse blood, they were easier to handle than griffins, making hippogriffs a popular flying mount. The guards in the sky were riding those.

Flying mounts—though these were monsters—fetched extremely high prices. It would be impossible for mere mercenaries to collect so many.

Yes, they were dressed as mercenaries in order to deceive all manner of observers.

The land-bound group consisted of Imperial Guards. The airborne group, equipped with incredibly precious magic items that made both the wearer and their mount invisible, had drawn its members from the elites of the Imperial Air Guard.

Naturally, the owner of the carriages was the Baharuth emperor, Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix.

There was a number of reasons they were outfitted that way, but the most important was that it was unacceptable for the emperor to violate the border by openly bringing his knights into the kingdom. That's why even the carriage exteriors were simple in design compared to the interiors—although they were still fancier than average.

Jircniv's carriage, three spots back from the head of the column, was even more heavily guarded than the others. On its roof, the cargo rack had been upgraded to provide hiding places for two archers among the luggage.

Moreover, the interior was extravagant. It was less like a carriage and more like luxury accommodations on wheels. Both the walls and floor were covered in soft carpeting. The seats facing each other were equally soft, designed so that even long journeys didn't get uncomfortable.

There were three people riding with Jircniv. Four people might sound like a crowd, but that thought occurred only to people who had never ridden in a luxury carriage. In reality, the four men had plenty of space.

“—Majesty. Your Imperial Majesty, perhaps you should wake up.”

The voice roused Jircniv from his nap.

He rubbed his eyes with his thumbs and forefingers before emitting a huge yawn. Then with an “Nhhn!” he stretched his back. Loosening up his body felt good. Then he yawned again.

“You were sound asleep, but it seems you’re still tired.”

The voice that woke Jircniv from his pleasant nap belonged to a secretary permitted to ride in the carriage with him, Reaunet Vermilion. He replied with a shake of his head.

“Oh, no, I’m not. I’m groggy but not tired anymore. But wow, I haven’t had a nap in a while—probably since I was a kid! When I’m at the palace, I have mountains of work I have to do, but on this trip, there’s nothing... This is the first time I feel grateful to Gown.”

“Ahhh yeah, you’re always busy doing something. Why is that?”

The one who spoke to him as if he weren’t the emperor was the leader of the Four, Baswood. Really, the tone alone warranted a frown, but no one in the carriage did anything.

Jircniv smiled wryly at his overly familiar but supremely capable subordinate. “It’s all that Fresh Blood Emperor’s fault. He pushed reforms through so fast that a lot of things are behind schedule. What an idiot. There should have been an easier way to go about it, maybe gathering more capable people beneath him beforehand. You guys should tell him off for me next time you see him. Oh, but make sure you have an alternate suggestion in mind.”

Now everyone in the carriage wore the same wry smile as Jircniv.

Originally, it was the nobles, especially court nobles, who performed administrative duties for the empire. That was because education was limited from childhood, for a variety of reasons including monetary, to members of the aristocracy. Of course, the privileged class also had a vested interest in maintaining that system.

But because Jircniv purged the nobility, there were fewer civil servants. The main concern was that, since he was carrying out reforms, the amount of work had actually increased. As a matter of course, the workload per person grew, and that was true for Jircniv, too.

The Fresh Blood Emperor had disposed of a great many inept aristocrats—hence the nickname—but it was only afterward that he realized even useless people had roles to perform.

Still, he had no regrets.

There was no other time to perform the purge. If he had waited for the perfect chance, command of the knights would have become splintered among the various great nobles, rendering his father’s death meaningless.

It was because of the purge that the empire had a future.

Women suffer to bear children. His heavy workload was his

suffering to give birth to a new empire. If he overcame it, he would gain something precious.

By association, this line of thinking brought Jircniv's own offspring to mind.

He wasn't married, but he had children. Since he had no empress, they weren't mistresses but rather women whose company he enjoyed, and they had produced babies. Unfortunately, he didn't feel any love toward the children, but he hoped that one of them would be exceptional—because if the woman he made his empress in the future gave birth to someone who wasn't capable, he could swap that child in.

"But keeping the emperor constantly busy isn't the proper path our country should take. I want to cultivate civil servants and return as soon as possible to the emperor's original role of giving general orders. And I don't want to put my heir, the future emperor, through this kind of hardship. After all, I wouldn't want him to blame me for burying him in work."

The current empire hinged on the talents of one remarkable individual. No, perhaps it was more accurate to say that Jircniv had constructed a magnificent building using the scaffolding built by exceptional predecessors. But the next emperor and the emperor after that weren't guaranteed to be so brilliant.

Though he didn't say it aloud, Jircniv wanted to build the kind of empire that could function without issue as long as the ruler had some semblance of ability.

"That will be difficult. You've become an absolute ruler. I'm not sure you would be able to rule in the same way as previous emperors."

"Vermilion. It's *your* job to make it happen. It's only natural I have final say. That's what previous emperors hoped for and the result of the politics they practiced. But even if I have absolute power, it's not right for me to micromanage. I mean, what would be the point of having civil servants, right? Did you leave your brain behind somewhere?"

"He definitely didn't forget it at the Imperial Magic Academy, Your Majesty." Fluder, the one in charge of the Ministry of Magic that managed the academy, chimed in to say they'd never turned out anyone so stupid.

"Ha-ha, yeah. You're right about that, Gramps." Jircniv cleared his throat and refocused the atmosphere. "As of my reign, the empire has regained its youth—it's a baby. I'm destroying the old to let in the new. As you say, Vermilion, until the country matures somewhat, I've got my work cut out for me, but if it stays a child forever, that's a problem. I need to come up with a plan so that when I set a general

policy in the future, I can rest assured knowing the civil servants and military officers will reliably execute it.”

Countries that relied entirely on a single absolute individual were weak. Jircniv knew that.

Reaunet bowed his head in understanding, showing his hair, thinner than his age would imply.

“The next emperor...? Oh, right, are you planning to have a kid with her?”

He knew immediately which “her” Baswood meant. After all, Baswood held a high opinion of only one of his women.

Jircniv chose his companions based on their faces and their parents’ standing, but there was one case where he ignored all that. She had not been selected for her looks or her upbringing but for her brain, and she was the only one of his companions who he allowed to comment on politics—granted, not publicly but in bed.

Initially, he had no interest in sleeping with her. That had been her idea.

He would have been happy to make her his empress.

“No, she doesn’t want that. She even says stuff like, ‘Beauty is a treasure you’re born with, and it’s an essential asset for someone at the top. A poor brain can be compensated for with hard work and capable subordinates, but there’s nothing that can be done about looks.’”

“With your blood, the child’s looks should be guaranteed. Well, I admit that followers are happier to take orders from a dashing emperor.”

“So it really does work that way, huh?”

Jircniv wouldn’t know, since there was no one in a position higher than his. No matter how ugly someone was, if they were exceptionally capable, he would use them, and personally, he’d consider putting them in an important post.

“It’s certainly preferable to a toad on its back. Your Imperial Majesty, I’m sure you prefer the woman writhing on top of you to be beautiful, right?”

“Well, I suppose. I guess I sort of get it...but really?” He cocked his head; something didn’t quite make sense.

“I imagine you’re thinking where to get your empress from?”

Jircniv frowned at Fluder’s question.

“If it’s a choice between here or elsewhere, then I’d pick elsewhere. There’s no point in taking a wife from the empire at this point. It would have to be a foreign girl... I’m expected to go after that unfathomable one.”

Fluder stroked his beard. “Princess Renner?”

Jircniv winced as he nodded.

The third princess of the Re-Estize Kingdom, Renner Theiere Chardelon Ryle Vaiself... Known as the “Golden Princess” for her famed beauty, she had nonetheless maintained her number one rank on Jircniv’s list of most hated women for several years running. On the other hand, someone he did like was the mayor Cabelia of Bebard, one of the city-state league’s leaders.

“I never have any idea what she’s thinking. When I hear what she’s been up to, I get the strange feeling she’s failing because that’s what she wants.”

There can’t really be a person like that. That’s what he wanted to think, but Jircniv was well aware how complex and bizarre humans were. If she was aiming to fail, what was her reasoning? When he tried to analyze Renner’s thoughts, he got a horrible feeling like he was becoming more and more tangled in a spider’s web.

“...Won’t someone just assassinate that weirdo for me already?”

“If that’s an order, I can call on Ijaniya right away.”

Ijaniya was a gang of assassins, named after one of the Thirteen Heroes, that had been spotted in the eastern parts of the empire and around territory belonging to the city-states. Apparently, they worked in mysterious ways. The empire had been sounding them out to see if it could bring them under its wing but had yet to receive a favorable response.

“No, no. I need her to pass on her earth-shattering knowledge. It’s better for me to keep her alive than to plot her murder... Has that woman already figured that all out?”

“Could she have thought that far?”

Jircniv sighed a “Who knows?” considering that it was actually plausible.

A spy in the kingdom was relaying the things Renner said. Some of the plans she proposed impressed him. He knew they were great ideas because they worked well in the empire when he employed them.

It wouldn’t benefit the empire if anything bad happened to her.

Sometimes the timing of her proposals made it seem like she was reading the movements of the empire. But that would mean somehow she was observing the empire with no agents to act as her eyes or ears and cleverly maneuvering based on what she learned.

Jircniv wanted to win over even the captain of the Royal Select, Gazef, but Renner’s unfathomable nature made her unappealing.

“Well, if Renner died, the kingdom might not suffer much from the loss, but if Your Imperial Majesty died, our country would disintegrate. The Four can protect you from assassins, but we can’t do anything about other dangers, so please don’t work yourself too hard.”

“Of course. Until I establish a solid administrative organization in

the empire, I have to stay alive no matter what.”

Losing the absolute leader of the administration at this juncture could mean the collapse of every step of progress he had accomplished so far.

Exactly how large would the empire grow in the future? Anyone with malicious intentions would surely do their best to eliminate the emperor as soon as they realized, especially if they were from a neighboring country like the kingdom or the Theocracy.

In fact, the reason the empire wanted control over Ijaniya was to deploy them as counter-assassins.

“Right. We can’t lose you now. We’re on guard against poison and physical danger because we always have a faith caster nearby, but the lack of someone truly skilled for the job is worrisome. I would have taught someone myself, but I’m not very skilled with faith magic.”

“Your talent is being a wizard. You can’t be an expert at everything. Oh yeah. We requested the Theocracy’s cooperation in recruiting someone but didn’t get a very good reply. What if we had the believers in the Four Gods and the minor deities compete to see who’s best? The empire could reward the shrine that achieves the best results.”

Competition would naturally lead to technological development. But Reaunet shook his head so hard in response to Jircniv’s suggestion that his hair became a mess, sticking to his forehead.

“That would be too dangerous. Each shrine in the empire exists by virtue of donations and the hard work that goes into developing products to sell, all using their own techniques. If the government was to pressure them or try to strike a deal, it would inevitably spark opposition.”

“I see... Well, then again, if we controlled the shrines, the empire would be more powerful. In that sense, the Theocracy has an enviable setup. It must have been accomplished hundreds of years ago, but I wish I knew how they managed to do that.”

“Faith magic is tied to the health of the masses, as well. In any case, I think it’s great how Your Highness takes anyone with magic ability, faith or otherwise, and bestows knighthood or an education upon them. If you only beat on monsters with swords, you end up with a lot more fatal wounds.” Baswood had experienced a close call on a monster extermination mission once in the past. He groaned before continuing, “Personally, I wish we had resurrection magic. Then we wouldn’t have to worry so much even if one of our best died. Is it true, though, that resurrection spells sap life force and render normal people into ashes?”

Hearing this, Fluder leaned forward.

Whether it was because he was in charge of the emperor’s

education or because he loved to talk about magic, he tended to join conversations at times like these, his eyes glittering. The problem was that he had a tendency to drone on forever—Jircniv made a bored face in a way that only Baswood and Reaunet could notice.

“It is. The tier-five faith spell Raise Dead depletes a large amount of life force. Supposedly at higher tiers, less vitality is required, but... it’s believed no one can use such an advanced spell. I’ve heard that ancient magic of the dragonlords can bring someone back without loss of life force—”

“So can the queen of the Dragon Kingdom do that?”

“Good question, Vermilion. It’s said that she can use ancient magic, also known by other names such as primeval magic or spirit magic, since it’s public knowledge that she has blood of the Brightness Dragonlord in her. But whether or not she can perform resurrections is a mystery. The structure of primeval magic is completely different from today’s techniques, so there’s no way for those of us who can only use modern magic to know.”

When Fluder finished speaking, he glanced at Jircniv. Concerned his annoyed face had been noticed, Jircniv panicked for a moment but relaxed when he heard Fluder’s next words...

“I’d really like to do some research on ancient magic... If someone with the blood of the Brightness Dragonlord can use it, then lineage is clearly an important factor. If you take an empress, I think you should choose someone close to that queen...”

“Give me a break, Gramps. I have no interest in that old piece of mutton trying to pass as a lamb.”

He was absolutely not marrying his second-most-hated woman. And although he didn’t have any love for his children, he wasn’t so cruel as to consign them to a life as guinea pigs.

Although, when weighed against the benefits the country would reap...

Just then, there was a knock on the carriage door.

For defense against detection by intelligence magic and physical attacks, the carriage was metal plated. Consequently, it had no windows. Baswood opened the door slightly to take a look outside—or more accurately, to check who was knocking.

As long as they were surrounded by knights, it had to be an ally, but it never hurt to be cautious.

“Your Imperial Majesty, it’s Leinas.”

“Open the door.”

When the door opened, in blew fresh air off the plain, causing the hair of the humans inside to stir slightly. Given the season, the wind should have been cold, but the air that entered the carriage was a warm, comfortable temperature. It went without saying that it was

due to magic.

The one riding alongside the carriage was the woman who had been at the head of the line earlier.

“Excuse me, Your Imperial Majesty. I—”

It was hard to hear her over the wind.

“We can’t talk like this. Get in. Forget the conventions.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. Then allow me to join you.”

With that, she nimbly leaped off her horse and landed in the doorway of the carriage as it continued rolling along. She acted as if this was nothing special, but considering how she was clad in plate armor and her horse was moving at a full gallop, her athleticism was readily apparent. That was only natural. She was one of the Four—Heavy Bomber Leinas Rockbruiise.

Once she was inside the carriage, she quietly shut the door and took a seat next to Baswood. As the door closed, they could see that one of the guards outside, running alongside the carriage, had taken the reins of her horse.

The spell cast on the carriage merely maintained a comfortably warm air temperature, which meant it had no effect on coming into direct contact with something cold; Leinas’s metal armor had been subjected to the frigid air outside. When that chilly lump settled down next to Baswood, he shivered.

“We received a Message from a scout who’s up ahead.”

One of the defensive spells cast on the carriage shielded it from intelligence magic. This helped keep them concealed, but one issue was that spells like Message were also blocked. Therefore, it had been decided that the head guard, Leinas, would receive and convey any incoming Messages.

“The vanguard has reached the Great Tomb of Nazarick. They were welcomed upon telling the maids at the log cabin what time you would arrive.”

“Maids? I thought it was a subterranean tomb... Maids? Maids, huh...? Is it that thing where...? Like, I heard in some countries maids were buried with the king to continue serving him after death. Is that it? Or did dark elves who left the forest move into the tomb?”

“Unfortunately, the Message didn’t go into that much detail, Your Imperial Majesty.”

“...I just don’t get it. The forest isn’t part of the human realm, so there’s no known history, but... Well, I want to believe they won’t act like those monsters who visited the imperial palace, but tell our troops to stay on their toes.”

“It’s just as you say, Your Imperial Majesty. Considering the power of those messengers, we may be heading into an unknown world. Please exercise caution. If anything happens, please come for me

directly.”

“You mean run away using Teleportation if it comes to that?”

Fluder’s smile was affirmative.

“We’ll buy you the time you need. No matter how many opponents there are, we’ll make sure Your Imperial Majesty has enough time to escape.”

Baswood grinned, but Leinas didn’t say anything. It was less tacit agreement and more silent disapproval, but no one said anything.

For starters, she was one of the Four, but she hadn’t sworn allegiance to Jircniv. Serving Jircniv merely benefited her as well; if someone who could better grant her wishes appeared, she would immediately abandon her current position.

In other words, Leinas was his least loyal knight.

Since the Four had been selected on strength alone, personality and devotion weren’t considered significant factors, but it was true that no one was less dedicated than her.

The reason he had brought her along to command his guards despite that was because he needed to leave Storm Wind Nimble Arc Dale Anoch behind, meaning he had no choice. If Unshakable were still around, he probably would have been here instead of Heavy Bomber.

“Excuse me one moment.” Leinas took a handkerchief out of her pocket and brought it to the right side of her face. The thing that looked like a golden cloth covering half her face was actually her hairstyle; she wiped beneath it.

When she finished, the handkerchief had been stained yellow—it was soaked with pus.

“I’m going to put myself first, so I’m sorry, but please forgive me.”

“Yeah, that’s fine. That’s what I promised when I had you become one of the Four—or rather, it’s the deal we made.”

“I see. That’s what you’ll all be doing, then? In that case, I’ll just curl into a little ball somewhere and stay out of your way,” Reaunet declared in all seriousness, trying to change the mood. He got a laugh.

“So at our current speed, how many more hours until we reach Nazarick?”

In response to Jircniv’s question, Reaunet took a watch out of his pocket and checked the time. Then he looked at Leinas and waited for her to nod before speaking. “Everything is going according to plan, so we should be there in about an hour.”

“Is that so? Well, I’m looking forward to it. Shall we see what this Ainz Ooal Gown is really like?”

Jircniv's carriage slowed and came to a halt. Still, he couldn't disembark immediately. It was a bother, but a certain degree of preparation was necessary to maintain the proper decorum.

Normally that would be the responsibility of his servants. Perhaps it would have been better to wait for the other carriage carrying the maids, but they didn't have that kind of time. After all, Jircniv had come to apologize. It wouldn't be very smart to keep the messengers waiting.

After straightening his clothes, Jircniv donned his cape. It was an extremely valuable item made from the pelt of a magical beast imbued with defensive magic. Once he put that on, no matter how cold it was outside, he wouldn't feel a thing.

After securing his scepter on his hip, the bare minimum of preparations was complete.

Jircniv examined himself once more to make sure his appearance wouldn't be embarrassing.

He was about to engage in verbal warfare with Ainz Ooal Gown. The word *embarrassing* wouldn't cut it if there were any blemishes in what was essentially his combat gear. Jircniv would have loved it if his opponent underestimated him due to poor observation, but he couldn't allow it to happen because his clothes were shabby.

Then, right as Jircniv nodded in satisfaction, a knock sounded as if on cue.

"All right, Your Imperial Majesty. I'll exit first."

"Thanks."

Following the brief exchange, Baswood reached for the door.

He opened it grandly, in a manner worthy of the carriage transporting the empire's supreme ruler. Just in case, Reaunet shielded Jircniv, putting his body squarely in the opening.

Beyond Baswood, Jircniv caught a glimpse of their surroundings.

The first thing that registered was the grass. Then he noticed the guards lined up facing one another. Farther back, he could see a swelling in the ground like a hill, along with a massive barred gate that seemed to be partially buried underground.

So is that the entrance to the Great Tomb of Nazarick? This is different from what I heard...but I guess it's within an acceptable margin of error.

Following Baswood, who lined up with the rest of the guards, Jircniv exited the carriage.

He took a deep breath. Although the fresh air flowing into his

lungs must have been cold, Jircniv, protected by his magic garments, felt only the pleasantness of the optimal warmth.

With a heavy exhale, he turned to look at his subordinates.

Fluder's leading disciples with their robes and staves...

Faith casters attached to the knight order, their sigils around their necks...

The guards standing at attention, among them the scouts who had arrived in advance...

Personally, he wanted to know what kind of people they met, but given the current circumstances, that wasn't an option.

The maids and the contents of one other carriage weren't outside yet.

Well, they are gifts, so that makes sense. Okay, so the log cabin place must be inside the gate...? Oh wait, it must be that, I guess.

When he looked to the left, he spotted a single-story log cabin. It appeared so out of place compared to the grass and the graves that he couldn't help but grin awkwardly. Where did the wood to build it come from in the first place? He could see the Azerlisia Mountains off in the distance and remembered the Tove Woodlands extending around them.

Did they haul it all the way out here? I don't know how great the distance is, but it must have been a lot of work.

It wasn't as if Jircniv knew very much about log cabins, but it didn't seem like a terribly magnificent building. That said, considering the surroundings, perhaps the fact that a building existed at all was impressive.

...That front door is awfully huge. Is it a double door? And why is it so tall? It practically goes up three stories. Did this used to be a storehouse or something?

As Jircniv gazed at the log cabin, Baswood and Leinas lined up to his right and Reaunet and Fluder across from them.

"Your Imperial Majesty, shall we bring the others out of their carriages?"

Reaunet had leaned in to ask, but Jircniv answered without looking. "No. We don't need them yet. More importantly—"

Jircniv's answer didn't cut off because the log cabin door opened. It was because two gorgeous women came out.

They wore orthodox maid uniforms. The outfits seemed well made, but he didn't think much else about them. The women's almost abnormally symmetrical features, though, surprised even Jircniv, who had met a fair number of beautiful princesses. The sight of the creatures gripped his heart.

How incredibly...lovely. But...

The pair was extremely good-looking; if they had been the

daughters of a noble in the empire, he would have showered them with his highest praises. He might have even considered them for a spot within his inner palace. But this was a tomb in the middle of a plain. Their presence here made no sense and gave him the intense feeling that something was wrong.

He heard someone quietly suck their teeth on his right, but he didn't have time to pay attention to that now.

"Hey, Gramps, are they an illusion by any chance?"

"Hmm, I'm not sure, but they don't seem to be."

"Then are they human? It seems obvious they're not dark elves, but..."

"Hmm, I'm not sure about that, either...but they probably aren't human."

Hearing that made Jircniv feel a bit better. If they weren't human, it wasn't nearly as strange for them to be in this place.

The answer made sense; he could accept it without issue.

The two maids bowed, and the one with her hair up spoke.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Your Imperial Majesty, Emperor Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix. I've been entrusted with welcoming you all. My name is Yuri Alpha. And the one behind me is here as my assistant. Her name is Lupusregina Beta. We'll only accompany you for a short while, but I am delighted to make your acquaintance."

Having been given some time to get over his shock, Jircniv had enough presence of mind to at least reply. "I appreciate the courteous introduction. I heartily thank Sir Ainz Ooal Gown for sending such beautiful ladies to greet us. And there's no need for you to use my formal titles. Here, I am simply another person, so feel free to be friendlier and call me Jir. No, I insist." He directed an affable smile at Yuri.

Even though any woman would normally be moved by Jircniv's face, Yuri's stony expression remained unbroken. He had been paying close attention to her eyes to see how she would react, but he did not notice even the slightest ripple.

Was he not her type? Or was she one of those girls who didn't mix business and pleasure? Maybe it was because she was currently busy serving her master?

I can't get a read on her. I wanted to at least make a somewhat good impression, but I guess it'll be tough. I'm pretty confident I make good company for a woman, though... Oh, if what Gramps said is true, then maybe she's not human. Then perhaps to a woman of a different species, I'm... But what race is she? From the looks of her, it'd be a close relative of humans, but...

He had no idea what her true identity was.

But between those two dark elves and these two maids, Ainz Ooal

Gown must be a sucker for looks. In that case, anyone who doesn't surpass these two is worthless...

Jircniv thought of the women waiting in the other carriage.

They were the daughters of nobles, all beautiful enough that Jircniv could boast, and he had brought them along to present to Ainz Ooal Gown as a gift. The girls knew what would happen to their families if they disobeyed his orders, so after a tearful farewell, they had come here prepared, but...

I guess it was pointless. But maybe they'll be happy to hear that he won't need them, since he has more beautiful companions already. Or maybe they'll have mixed feelings about that, as women? Maybe I should have looked for some elves to serve as a gift instead...

He knew there were elf slaves in the empire, but the reason he didn't seek them out was because he didn't have enough time, and also because he planned to use them in future dealmaking—not with Ainz Ooal Gown but with Mare in secret negotiations.

If he could strip that timid little girl bare and find out what made her tick, he suspected he could get her to do his bidding.

In exchange for liberating enslaved members of a closely related race, I could ask her to do me simple favors behind Gown's back. Then I could threaten her with the fact that she has been keeping secrets from her master and get her to carry out minor requests. After that, I'd just keep increasing my grip on her. That was my plan, but...

As Jircniv was reviewing his unhatched chickens, Yuri addressed him.

"You jest. Our master, Lord Ainz Ooal Gown, ordered us to extend the highest courtesies to Your Imperial Majesty, so please forgive me if I let your kindness go to waste."

"Is that right? Well, that's too bad," Jircniv joked with a shrug of his shoulders. "But whenever you like is fine. Speaking of Sir Gown, where is he?"

"He's currently getting ready to meet you. Please wait here a little longer."

"I see. Where can we wait? In the log cabin?"

"No, here, please."

Jircniv looked up at the sky. It didn't seem like it was going to rain, but the sky was covered in dark clouds—it definitely couldn't be called good weather. Moreover, though Jircniv himself couldn't feel the cold, it was still winter.

What would she have to be thinking to make guests wait outside? She was probably trying to send a message about who was superior.

Jircniv had already been relegated to the lower position when he had been summoned to Gown's residence to apologize. With this

follow-up blow, it seemed Gown was quite devious.

"I see." He narrowed his eyes. "Understood. Then I'll return to my carriage and wait there."

Jircniv sensed indignation well up in the eyes of several guards. They must have thought it was rude to keep an emperor waiting, even if this was a neighboring country and the territory of a potentially hostile force.

But no one said a word. If their master accepted it, it wasn't their place to object. Or...

Is it because they know what kinds of atrocities those dark elves are capable of? If that's the case, I'll have to keep my wits about me when dealing with Gown. They drove a wedge between us in a single blow. Even if that was some kind of once-in-a-lifetime power, who would be able to tell us that? The fact that they're just children is also huge. It makes a strong impression when kids can cause so much damage.

"Please wait." Yuri's soft voice stopped Jircniv as he was about to walk away. "Since we're having you wait here, Lord Ainz ordered us to provide you polite hospitality."

Jircniv was mildly stunned. "Ainz"...? *He lets his maids call him by his first name? Or is she not a maid...? Ah, I see. They must be close. Perhaps he has a physical relationship with her. Well, any man could understand why. It'd be hard to keep your hands off a woman that gorgeous.*

Sensing they might get along, Jircniv gave exaggerated thanks. "Oh! Well, in that case, what sort of welcome have you prepared for us and where?"

"Allow me to make preparations. First of all, the weather doesn't seem very good, so we'll start with that."

"What do you...? Whoa!"

Jircniv wasn't the only one to shout in surprise. The casters, the guards, Baswood, Leinas, Fluder—everyone present couldn't help but emit a shocked cry.

The overcast sky slowly began to change.

As if they were being cleared away by a giant hand, the dark clouds overhead disappeared. It was obvious the flying hippogriff riders were in a panic.

"What...? It feels warmer now..."

"You too? I'm not imagining things?"

Hearing his guards talking, Jircniv removed his cape and canceled the spell that protected him from adverse temperatures.

"Y-your Imperial Majesty!"

Reaunet was shocked to see him remove his cape, but Jircniv didn't have the composure to reply.

"Hoo! Hoo-ha! Hoo-ha-ha-ha! What in the world? The hell did

they do? Gramps! What is this?!” Jircniv abandoned his calm and turned a twisted expression on Fluder.

Comfortable springtime air surrounded them. There was no trace left of chilly winter. This sort of feat hadn’t been covered in the magic education he received from Fluder. So what could it be?

“It must not be arcane magic... Druid faith magic includes Control Weather, but...” Having gotten that far, he broke into a smile. “... Control Weather is a tier-six spell. As far as I can tell, it’s not merely the weather, meaning this must be higher-tier magic. Amazing.”

“Is this the power of that dark el— The messenger?”

If so—assuming it was the same caster who created the fissure that swallowed up his guards—then it was understandable. He sure hoped it was the same caster. He didn’t want to believe there could be a large number of people with similar abilities. That would be a nightmare.

“Perhaps...but there’s no proof.”

Fluder’s amused tone bothered Jircniv.

His teacher was brilliant and he respected him, but when magic was involved, Fluder had a tendency to turn into a good-for-nothing. It was times like this that the old man really got on Jircniv’s nerves.

“Now that your wait will be more pleasant, I’ll move on to the next order of business.” Paying no mind to Jircniv’s annoyance, the maid indicated there was still more to come.

He wanted to tell her to stop, but he managed to control himself. He wanted to beg her not to disturb them any further, but his pride as the emperor of the Baharuth Empire held him back.

“All right. Come on out.”

At Yuri’s order, the door to the log cabin opened and something gigantic came out.

“Eegh!”

Someone’s shriek rang out. It was a strange cry like a chicken being strangled.

When they realized who had screamed, it wasn’t only Jircniv who felt a ripple of alarm. He thought he was dreaming.

The one who had emitted such an unthinkable noise was none other than the empire’s principal court wizard, Triad Caster Fluder Paradyne, said to be as great or perhaps even greater than the Thirteen Heroes. A man of that caliber was staring in shock at the things that had just emerged from the log cabin, his eyes big as saucers.

Several more shouts went up, all from Fluder’s leading disciples.

“This is absurd! Those are—!”

“I—I can’t believe it! It can’t be!”

“Watch out! They’ll attack! Defensive magic! Authorize us to cast

defensive magic!”

The disciples were getting into attack stance when Fluder snapped at them. “Silence! Stop that racket!”

The beings that appeared from inside the log cabin were so shocking that everyone’s eyes were drawn to them.

They were unmistakably grotesques, monsters clad in black armor.

Their bodies were strangely large, their silhouettes sinister. It was as though a god had extracted all the violent tendencies of humans and malevolently given them solid form. Though their decayed faces wore no expression, their eyes gleamed with an obvious hatred for the living.

There were five of them.

At the head of the group was one monster carrying a marble table, while the four behind it were each skillfully holding multiple chairs.

The creatures displayed no outward sign of hostility, almost as if to sneer at the vigilant disciples who had readied themselves for combat.

A *thud* sounded.

A disciple near Fluder had gone deathly pale and fallen weakly to his knees. No, there went another four. Almost all of them had fallen into the same state: taking short, gasping breaths, their pale faces frozen in shock.

“It can’t be. Of all the— No, it can’t. Death knights? He’s commanding death knights? And that many of them?”

Jircniv came back to his senses with a flash of understanding and shouted:

“Death knights? What’s a death knight? Gramps! Answer me! I heard that name a long time ago—is it the same thing said to be deep inside the Ministry of Magic?”

Yes. *Death knight*. He had heard that term before. Just one of the undead monsters had been enough to nearly throw the empire into crisis.

There was no answer to his question.

Fluder was gazing at the death knights with wide-eyed delight.

Realizing Fluder was of no use to him now, he strode roughly over to the leading disciples and grabbed one by the collar.

“What’s a death knight? Answer me!”

“Eek! Y-your Imperial Majesty, it is indeed the legendary undead held captive deep within the Ministry of Magic. Not even our master can tame it.”

All Jircniv could do was laugh. Not a shred of his dignity as the Baharuth emperor was left. It had been broken and scattered.

“...Hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo-hoo. What do you mean, ‘legendary undead’? There are five of them in front of us. Or do death knights

come in packs and one is five?! Are you making fun of me?"

"N-no! I would never!"

Someone stood next to him. When he looked, it was Baswood, one of the empire's strongest knights. His face was pale and twitching.

"Y-your Imperial Majesty, p-please calm down and listen. Those things are bad news. I'm not even sure if all of us together could restrain even one of them. You should probably escape while you can. This is bad. Really bad. Look, my hands are—" His hands were shaking. The tension on his face made it clear they weren't dancing with excitement.

"There's no telling what those things are capable of... I think... they're probably even stronger than Stronoff..."

The other of the Four was cautiously backing away. The only reason she hadn't already bolted immediately was because she didn't want to attract the monsters' attention and the fact that they weren't displaying any hostility at the moment.

It was like he'd wandered into a bad dream and gotten lost.

The scene before his eyes...

The death knights setting the furniture down on the grass... They certainly looked like servants, not legendary undead.

But given the reactions of everyone present, it must have been the truth that Fluder, the strongest caster Jircniv knew of, couldn't control them.

In other words, there were five monsters here that could probably surpass Fluder's ability in combat.

Fluder Paradyne's strength was probably comparable to the entire imperial army's. Granted, he didn't have infinite mana, so in a head-on clash, the army would eventually get the best of him, but if he resorted to flight and teleportation spells, he would have a chance of winning. That was the caliber of fighter he was.

These five death knights alone were equivalent to five times the imperial army?

It can't be.

It mustn't be.

That was too much power for one person. No, even for a nation, it was hard to acquire that much. Only places like the great nations, with their long histories, and the council state possessed that level of power. Could the master of a little tomb really have the same?

Ever since those two dark elves appeared, the thought that he had tried to ignore was unceremoniously thrust into his face.

"Ainz Ooal Gown...is untouchable... No, he's a monster we should have nothing to do with..."

Jircniv's mental state was shaken like a tiny boat at the mercy of a storm.

But with his iron will, he regained composure.

The sight of his guards being wiped out and those dragons had prepared him somewhat, which was significant.

If he hadn't gone through that, the shock would have been even greater and he might have taken an even more useless posture.

This tomb... Ainz Ooal Gown... How much power does he have? Five death knights plus that pair. And the dragons? That can't be the end of it. Why is he lurking in this place? And since when? Or is he making a move because his preparations are finally complete? I've heard that when undead gather, larger undead spawn. Death knights could spawn... Or, wait. Something even stronger than a death knight...? This is bad. There's no time, but I have to think of some way to—

Jircniv's thoughts were racing when Yuri said something that only deepened his confusion.

"Please don't worry. These are all death knights that Lord Ainz created. They are perfectly obedient to him, and since I've been given authority over them, they follow my orders as well. They won't harm you."

Her words blew away the thoughts he had been trying to put together.

"He made them...?"

Ainz Ooal Gown was capable of creating undead this powerful. It was a truth that plunged Jircniv into utter despair. The cost of creating such things must be astronomical; the fact that he had apparently met that price was horrifying.

No, she's bluffing. There's no way he could do that. It's just a lie to make them seem stronger than they are. If not—

Jircniv smiled.

Everything was such a pain now.

Yeah, I'm sick of this. I don't care anymore. Th-this time we can just see what we're up against. That's fine.

"Hoo-hoo-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha."

Right as Jircniv had given up on everything, giddy laughter erupted from next to him.

The source was Fluder.

It was clear from their expressions that the guards, leading disciples, priests—everyone except Jircniv—were in shock.

Fluder Paradyne was an elite caster, a hero whose culture and knowledge were unrivaled. He was a great man who, throughout imperial history, had single-handedly defeated monsters threatening the empire on more than one occasion. Many people respected him for his saintly countenance.

Everyone present could be counted among his admirers.

But at the moment, he was laughing with greed and desire that

were unbecoming of such a legendary hero.

There was power in that laughter.

The aura of a hero...

That was exactly the spirit he was hitting them with at that moment. The protective fatherly warmth he usually projected was gone.

The magic within him was immensely powerful; he could defeat the Four all at once. That was the magnitude of his heroic strength, but his madness seemed to deepen the more he laughed.

It would have been stranger for the guards to not feel goose bumps.

At that point, only the group from Nazarick and Jircniv were unfazed.

"...He commands death knights. And so many of them! Wonderful! Marvelous! Splendid! Hoo-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

Tears appeared in the corners of Fluder's eyes, and on his face was a broken smile.

—No.

It was the true face of a man who had cast off his position as the empire's principal court wizard in order to peer into the magical abyss.

It had always been there beneath his heroic expression. It had simply risen to the surface, drawn out by the appearance of an immensely powerful caster.

"Your Imperial Majesty, now then, now then, what will you do? Will you teleport away? If you flee now, I think you can make it—well, if the master of this land is generous, that is."

Jircniv smiled at Fluder's sneer-like expression. "That face fits you better, Gramps. Now, let me ask you a question: Do you really think I would run away?"

A fissure opened along Fluder's face. The maniacal smile brought fear to all who saw it.

"Bravo, Your Imperial Majesty, or rather, my cute little Jir. Disciples! Open your eyes. Be thankful, for today you will meet the greatest caster on the entire continent. See the peak, then strive to reach it."

Fluder's disciples had gone pale, and the guards looked like they were ill after realizing the kind of being they were dealing with.

They knew their friends had been killed, but when Fluder, the first legendary hero to make his mark on imperial history, declared their opponent to be "the greatest caster," the weight of that declaration sat in their guts like a boulder.

"Your Imperial Majesty, isn't this super-bad?"

"...We're allowed to run, right?"

Baswood was puzzled while Leinas was pleading.

Jircniv took a look around.

Setting aside Fluder and his disciples, the guards were also growing tense—to the point where they could rout at any moment.

It stemmed from the anxiety of having no plan to deal with either Fluder's odd behavior or the strength of the death knights.

"There's nothing we can do, is there? If you want to run, go ahead, but you won't be one of us anymore. I do hope we don't meet with the same fate as the workers who came before us..."

Leinas's grimace showed her teeth.

"Are you all right with that?"

"Baswood... Gramps—Fluder is the one with the most detailed knowledge of magic, and well, look at him. I think we'll have to leave it up to them."

"What about praying for good luck and making a run for it?"

"Do you really think we'll be able to get away?"

Baswood glanced at the maids, who were continuing their preparations despite being in earshot of this discussion about fleeing.

"What about taking a hostage?"

"I don't like being given choices you know are impossible. Try saying that again, Lightning..."

"...My apologies. Frankly, that one maid is more difficult to fathom than the death knights. If someone told me she was stronger, I'd believe it... We're having this rude conversation, and she's not even batting an eye. Terrifying."

That maid's as strong as a monster herself.

With that thought, Jircniv shook his head, utterly worn out. He wanted to believe that wasn't true simply because she was present at this tomb. He ignored the placidly smiling dark elves in the corner of his mind.

"Are you almost ready...? We've finished our preparations. If you like, please come and make yourself at home."

There were several tables and chairs on the grass. The tables were covered with pure-white cloths, shaded by parasols. The death knights who had carried everything were quietly lined up out of the way along the log cabin's wall.

"We've set out some refreshments for you."

There were chilled decanters on the table with water droplets clinging to them. Inside was an orange liquid. Next to the decanters were clear, delicate glass cups. All the items were exquisitely ornate.

Even Jircniv, an emperor who spent his days surrounded by only the best life had to offer, widened his eyes in surprise.

"If you need anything, please let us know. Girls..."

The door to the log cabin opened once again, and more maids

came out. They were so gorgeous, Jircniv momentarily forgot everything that had happened so far.

A chignon, a straight cut, rolled curls. Each of the three women had her own type of beauty.

“This place is full of pretty ladies.”

Jircniv agreed with the comment from one of his guards. *Why are there so many good-looking women out here at this tomb? Does it spawn them? Do they grow out of the ground?*

He heard someone else suck their teeth, but he decided to ignore it.

“Let’s have a drink, the—”

“No, more importantly, when will I be able to meet Sir Ainz Ooal Gown? I’d like to see him as soon as possible... It would be fine even if it’s only me. If I could have a few minutes before his meeting with Jir, that—”

“Fluder, would you calm down?” This sort of rudeness couldn’t go on any longer. “Don’t forget why you’re here. We’ve come as representatives of the empire, not to seek the magic knowledge you want so badly.”

A glimmer of composure returned to Fluder’s eyes—just enough for him to restrain his personal desires.

“...Your Imperial Majesty, do excuse me. I seem to have gotten a bit excited. My deepest apologies for having disturbed everyone.”

“That’s the way, Gramps. Have a drink and chill out a bit. Okay, I think I’d like a drink.”

“Yes, sir.”

Yuri poured orange liquid into the glass in front of the seat Jircniv sat in. A sweet citrus smell filled the air.

Jircniv took a sip of the fruit water—and smiled in spite of himself. It was so delicious. It was a gesture that said, *Then what have I been drinking all this time?* The guards looked surprised as well. If Jircniv, who lived a life of luxury, was surprised, surely the guards were infinitely more shocked. Many of them even forgot their manners and guzzled their portions.

“This is great.”

“What is this stuff? The tart and sweet flavors are perfectly balanced.”

“It goes down so smoothly and doesn’t leave any cloying sweetness in the mouth.”

Listening to the comments around him, Jircniv took another drink. He suddenly felt energy welling up inside him.

Is my body stimulated because the drink tastes so good? So Nazarick has extremely high-class drinks, as well. I guess I was inadvertently rude to those dark elves. If this is the kind of thing they drink every day, they must

have thought what we served them was disgusting.

Jircniv smiled wryly.

Who knew a single drink could make one feel so defeated?

Ahh, my mind is at peace. Yes, I feel peaceful for the first time since coming here. Maybe I could just...go home now.

How long did he stay out of the sun listening to the sound of the wind rushing across the spring meadow? Eventually Yuri spoke the words Jircniv had been dreading.

“Sorry to have kept you waiting. Lord Ainz is ready now. Right this way.”

3

Jircniv arrived at a large dome-shaped room, and before him was a massive door. There were strangely elaborate carvings of a goddess on the right and a demon on the left. Looking around, he saw countless sinister-looking statues.

If I had to give it a name, maybe the Gate of Judgment?

Those were Jircniv’s thoughts as he stood gazing at it.

Silence dominated the room to the point that the quiet itself seemed audible.

Perhaps it was more that no one who had been brought that far had uttered a word. The only sound was the occasional metal on metal of someone moving in their armor.

It was less restraining themselves to observe good manners and more that the luxurious scenery they had passed through on their way had left them stunned.

Faced with this mythological realm, asking them to hold in their astonishment was too much.

Even Jircniv found himself unable to suppress the urge to glance here and there as they walked. Their surroundings were just that amazing.

He looked over his shoulder at the subordinates who had accompanied him this far: Baswood, ten select guards, Fluder and his disciples, his secretary Reaunet, and the priests of the knight order. Leinas and the other guards were keeping watch over the carriages.

All those behind him, with the exception of Fluder, apparently felt unworthy. They sensed keenly how small and insignificant they were—the result of walking down a hallway that the empire couldn’t replicate even if they exhausted all its cultural arts.

The Great Tomb of Nazarick, a tomb in name only, was a

gorgeous world, a residence fit for the gods. Their impression of the caster who ruled over it, Ainz Ooal Gown, had become so colossal that it could hardly be described.

Jircniv wore a borderline self-deprecating smile. People have an instinct to bow their heads before anything superior to them. If there was anyone who was unmoved by this exceedingly grand building and its furnishings, surely they possessed a heart of stone.

...This is a real problem.

Ainz Ooal Gown, awaiting him beyond that door, surpassed Fluder as a caster and was probably unrivaled in all of history. The grandeur of his home surpassed human imagination, and his followers were immensely powerful. In other words, he was a being who encapsulated every manner of might.

Why has he been keeping himself cooped up until now? Jircniv didn't know the answer but figured he would soon find out.

With the coming talks, he should be able to grasp at least some of the caster's aims.

He wouldn't make all these power plays only to ask for my apology, then send me home, right?

At first, his plan had been to investigate Ainz Ooal Gown's desires and find a way to manipulate them to the empire's advantage. The apology was no more than an excuse to meet.

But...

What could possibly motivate someone with so much power? Nothing I can offer would be enough.

There was a good chance that, just as a single-carat gem wouldn't be enough to arouse Jircniv's interest, anything Jircniv could offer wouldn't inspire any desires in Ainz Ooal Gown.

For starters, money was out of the question.

As for military might and magic technology, there was no way Ainz Ooal Gown would be interested when the empire's strength and development were so inferior to his own.

Enticing him with companionship would also be pointless, considering the presence of Yuri and the others.

So what does he want?

Jircniv had no idea. Maybe desire as humans experienced it wasn't enough to move Ainz Ooal Gown.

He thought of countless ways of handling his adversary—then concluded that nothing could be done.

He figured the smartest course of action was to make sure things didn't become hostile.

Victory this time means shielding the empire from harm and us making it home alive...

"...This might be difficult." With those thoughts on his mind, his

voice echoed louder than he intended it to. But no one reacted. That's how transfixed they were by the world around them.

"The Throne Room is through here. That is where Lord Ainz is waiting for you."

Yuri bowed toward Jircniv and the others, indicating that her work was done.

As if her words were the cue, the massive door slowly swung open despite no one touching it.

Someone gasped. No, not one person or even two. Probably more than ten. Most of the people with him. That they were shaken was proof they weren't prepared; it was a manifestation of their desire to flee. It meant that many of them had been hoping the door wouldn't open.

I guess I should be thankful it opened automatically. If he had had to wait for everyone to steel themselves, they may never have opened the door.

The room that came into view was huge and the ceiling high. The walls were primarily white with ornamentation done mainly in gold.

The magnificent chandeliers that hung from the ceiling were made of jewels in a rainbow of colors and cast a dreamy sparkling light. On the walls, hanging from the ceiling to the floor, were large flags.

It was a perfect realization of the idea of a throne room. Jircniv couldn't think of a name more fitting.

Then he and all those in his entourage went pale at the presence that rushed out at them.

There was a red carpet running down the center of the room. Along either side stood beings whose power was so great there were no words.

A demon, a dragon, a strange humanoid creature, an armored knight, an insect on two legs, a spirit—they came in all shapes and sizes, but the thing they all shared was next-level strength. They were lined up along the sides of the carpet. Jircniv couldn't bring himself to count them.

All of them stared at him in silence. It was said that people of a certain class and authority had powerful eyes, but this was the first time Jircniv had felt physical pressure from a gaze.

From behind him he heard a hoarse shriek and rattling metal—signs that his subordinates were afraid.

But let's be honest.

Jircniv didn't feel like scolding them for making their fear known; on the contrary, he very much wanted to praise their self-control, since none of them had run away. No one had fled from this being who struck instinctive fear into humans.

Jircniv bumped his alert level up another ten notches. His guard

was higher than ever, because he realized even that was an underestimation.

He had come to the conclusion that Ainz Ooal Gown was a danger to the continued existence of not only the empire but of entire races—not only humans but subhumans as well.

Jircniv looked to the end of the carpet.

Off in the distance were some stairs with several people standing around them. He guessed they were aides of some sort. A beautiful girl with silver hair. A pale-blue monster like an upright insect. A man in a suit who seemed half-human, half-frog. There were also two dark elves, the sight of which put Jircniv slightly more at ease. If the two who had instantaneously killed so many of his men were mere grunts, he probably would have lost his mind.

Shifting his line of sight to the top of the stairs, he saw a gorgeous woman with wings and beyond her...

“So that’s...”

Seated on a throne made of crystal, holding a curious staff, was a horrifying embodiment of death.

A monster with its bone head exposed.

It was as if darkness had focused on a single point and coalesced into this being.

That’s—that’s Ainz Ooal Gown.

On his head was a splendid crown-like object, and he wore a luxurious raven-black robe. Numerous rings gleamed on his fingers. Even at a distance, Jircniv could tell the brilliantly made accessories this creature adorned himself with would be impossible for any artisan in the empire to make.

Flames the color of spilled blood lit the vacant orbits of Ainz Ooal Gown’s skeletal head. Jircniv felt those flames licking over him and the others.

He wasn’t at all surprised Gown wasn’t human. On the contrary, he was glad.

Since Ainz Ooal Gown was an inhuman monster, it was easier to accept his transcendent abilities.

“Phew,” Jircniv exhaled lightly.

It was an exhalation of determination.

Not much time had passed since the door opened. It probably was still acceptable to not have spoken yet, but he couldn’t just stand dumbstruck at the entrance forever. So...he stepped forward.

“Let’s go,” Jircniv said in a low voice that only his subordinates behind him could hear. Anyone who was looking probably would have been surprised to hear the words, since his mouth hadn’t moved. It wasn’t magic, just something he’d learned to do. Of course, at times like these it was a precious skill.

But he didn't sense anyone moving in response.

Standing before Ainz Ooal Gown meant walking past all the grotesques lining the carpet. Even if they knew they weren't going to be attacked, it would take courage to walk past so many.

It wasn't simple optimism that convinced Jircniv they wouldn't be attacked.

It was a well-known truth if a throne room was being used, it was usually for something ceremonial, to demonstrate a nation's authority.

In other words, choosing this location meant his aim was to impress Nazarick's power upon them; he wouldn't kill them here. If he wanted to slaughter them, he would have taken them to a slaughterhouse.

His subordinates should have understood that, too. Yet they still couldn't step forward. More than anything, their instincts were probably forbidding them to go any closer.

Beyond the grotesques were the aides. The power within them was enough to break any scale of levels.

Then on the throne, Ainz Ooal Gown.

Jircniv finally realized—that Gown must be what they called a god.

Even with the mental defense item Jircniv had equipped, the pressure he felt was extraordinary. If he wasn't careful, the man known as the Fresh Blood Emperor would end up on his knees.

But that was precisely why he had to press on.

Just as Jircniv was observing Ainz Ooal Gown, Gown was observing him. If the emperor failed to make an impression here, what would happen to his country? He had to at least get Gown to recognize some measure of his worth, then connect that to the continued existence of the empire.

Jircniv smiled wryly.

Verbal warfare? Ha.

This is the very definition of regret. Anything I do now is meaningless. I should probably just try to minimize the damage.

"Let's go!" Jircniv ordered forcefully. It was for those behind him but also to steel his own body and soul. He sensed them following him.

The carpet was soft. Considering how he was feeling, it was altogether too fluffy. Shrugging off the countless ghastly presences surrounding him, he walked forward focusing only on Ainz Ooal Gown. His instincts told him that if he took his eyes off his objective, his feet would stop moving.

It wasn't as if Jircniv was a brilliant warrior. He was able to lead the way, even though his guards were frightened, because of the mental strength being emperor had fostered.

Soon he reached the base of the stairs, where the aides were standing.

“Lord Ainz, the Baharuth emperor, Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix, is requesting an audience.”

The winged woman attending the crystal throne had a lovely voice that suited her beauty. Jircniv noticed that detail in spite of himself.

The being who seemed like a representation of death, created by the gods themselves, spoke in reply. “Good of you to come, Emperor of Baharuth. I am the master of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown.”

It was a more normal—humanlike—voice than Jircniv had expected. He relaxed ever so slightly.

He had a chance at reading the emotions contained in those words.

“I heartily thank you for your welcome, Sir Ainz Ooal Gown.”

Since his face was a skull, his expression was a total mystery to Jircniv. He wondered what would be a proper way to begin.

The one who broke that silence was neither Jircniv nor Ainz.

“Lord Ainz. I feel it is disrespectful for a mere human to attempt to speak to you as equals.” Then the man said, “**Bow down.**”

A chorus of metallic clanks sounded behind Jircniv. He could imagine what had happened without looking. His attendants had probably yielded to the man’s command and bowed down. Perhaps they were desperately trying to stand? He could hear groaning.

They had probably been compelled by a powerful psychic attack.

Without the necklace that Jircniv never took off, he would have been groveling, too.

Countless eyes moved to the emperor, the sole visitor remaining standing. They were the cold eyes of someone observing an animal during an experiment.

“Cut it out, Demiurge.”

“Yes, my lord!” The somewhat frog-like monster, Demiurge, bowed reverently to his master. “**You are released.**”

With the invisible pressure lifted, Jircniv could hear sighs of relief behind him.

“...Sir Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix. You’ve come so far, but then my subordinate did something so impolite. I hope you’ll forgive me for not properly keeping him in check. If you so wish it, I will even bow my head to you.”

A disturbance rippled through the crowd of monsters.

Multiple emotions clashed inside Jircniv.

His feelings of caution stemmed from the realization that Ainz Ooal Gown wasn’t the type to operate through power alone.

His relief stemmed from the same.

Above all, however, he felt fear—stemming from the knowledge that Ainz Ooal Gown had a firm grip over the minds of every monster present.

At the same time, he had a bad feeling that everything was going according to Ainz's plan, a strange feeling that everything had been arranged ahead of time.

"No need to apologize, Sir Gown. Subordinates often misunderstand their master's intentions and act recklessly. It seems some people in the empire have been doing the same, I'm ashamed to say."

One of the guards who had been freed suddenly rushed forward with an urn and placed it next to Jircniv. Really, he was supposed to act immediately, but he had hesitated.

Did Gown's subordinate act in order to get me to do this? If so, then I may need to veer off the prepared route... No, I can't. That would be the same as bringing a real sword to a sparring demonstration. If I go against the flow, I'll get seriously injured... This is bad.

"I'm not sure if I should call this place a tomb or not, but...this is the head of the foolish noble who unilaterally sent raiders into your tomb... I'd like you to accept it."

Inside the urn was Count Vemeer's head. He was the noble Jircniv had indirectly instructed to dispatch the workers.

The reason he kept around aristocrats who had neither pros nor cons was to use them in situations like this.

Dead men told no tales. Jircniv wasn't sure how much Ainz Ooal Gown knew, but he figured it was better to put a lid on anything that stank.

The reason Nazarick's messengers came could very well have been a threat to force the master of the empire to take responsibility for the workers setting foot in Ainz's palace. Which was why Jircniv would escape the situation by insisting he knew absolutely nothing.

The beautiful woman next to Ainz made a subtle gesture with her jaw, and Demiurge carried the urn up the steps.

Then he knelt before Ainz and took out the severed head.

Ainz took the head.

"I accept it. I wonder what I should do with this. It would be a waste to simply toss it."

Hmm? Oh, he must be joking. I see. He must know that Vemeer was being manipulated. The important question is where he got that information...

Suddenly, the count's head moved in the skeletal hand.

At first, he thought Ainz had moved it, but he soon understood he was mistaken. A thick liquid coated the head, which then dropped out

of Ainz's hand onto the floor.

That development was so shocking that Jircniv's eyes stayed glued to the head, and as he watched, a fountain of goopy black liquid sprayed onto the floor.

When the liquid finished raining down, what was standing there was a large suit of black armor.

A death knight.

Strangled gasps rose from behind Jircniv.

"Th-that's absurd!"

Yuri had certainly meant it literally when she said he "created" them. Jircniv willed himself to not bite his lower lip. He couldn't bear doing something so pathetic.

"Go. Get in line."

Following an order that seemed to resonate from the pit of the earth, the death knight descended the stairs and disappeared out of Jircniv's view.

How many more death knights can he create? Can he create as many as he wants if he has enough human corpses? That can't be! But if he can do this...then can he create an undead more powerful than a death knight? He might actually...be able...

"Now then, Sir Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix."

Hearing that quiet voice, Jircniv came back to his senses and turned to Ainz with a pleasant face.

"Oh, Sir Gown. You can call me Jircniv. My name is so long."

"Oh? Then I'll do that, Sir Jircniv. First of all, I'm sorry you had to see that. Well, my subordinate's rudeness earlier has canceled out the trouble the noble caused to Nazarick, so we have nothing more to discuss. I realize you took the time to come all this way, but you may go now."

"Huh?" He didn't understand what he had just been told. "S-sorry. I don't think I heard you properly. Do you mind saying that again?"

"An apology is no longer necessary. You may go. I'm going to be a bit busy now anyway." Ainz waggishly shrugged.

Jircniv had no idea what was going on.

Didn't he have some other reason for summoning them in addition to making them apologize? Then wasn't it strange of him to forgive them so simply?

His conduct was too inconsistent.

Wait! What did he say?

"Excuse me, but what do you mean you'll be busy?"

"Thanks to you, I learned that even if I live here minding my own business, there will be trouble. So I figure I'll go aboveground and crush the trouble before it comes to me."

"Wh-what does that mean?"

“First, those who have harmed us will pay. Then the annoying ones. Everyone who needs to be dealt with until my beloved tranquility returns.”

The babbling of a maniac.

No. He wasn't insane. Considering Ainz Ooal Gown's ability, military power, and fortune, it wasn't mere rambling. Jircniv simply hadn't been able to accept it because the sphere of his common sense was so limited.

Ainz Ooal Gown was capable of those things.

Jircniv's skin crawled, the sensation working its way up from his toes—

The Great Tomb of Nazarick...

—because a monster who had been holed up in a quiet place had decided to throw open his gates and stalk across the land.

Is that why he called me here? To declare war?! What's the best course of action? He's basically saying that he'll be an enemy to the empire in the future. Should I submit to him now?

He honestly began to think that was the wisest decision.

But he didn't think a country under the rule of a monster could be very happy. If he wasn't careful, all the empire's people would be turned into death knights. That was surely a fate worse than simply dying.

Jircniv thought harder than he had ever before. Really, he would have liked to take the issue home and discuss it with dozens of wise men before charting a policy. But that would take too long. Instead, he refreshed his smile and spoke.

“How about it? Would you like to form an alliance?”

“Don't you mean you wish to submi—? Urgh!”

A bell-like tone had sounded and then a creaking noise. The silver-haired girl grimaced slightly while the close-by Aura seemed irked.

Jircniv's vision wasn't good enough to catch what had happened, but apparently Aura had kicked the silver-haired girl.

“...You're always—”

“Enough. Silence.”

Ainz waved his hand with the majesty of a demon lord.

The motion indicated that it had been acquired as the result of living a long time as a ruler.

Jircniv was more alarmed than ever.

I guess he's been a ruler in this land for quite some time... That would explain why his demeanor is so impressive...

The two girls' voices overlapped as they expressed their regret for their foolishness.

The arrogance that Aura displayed when she came to his palace

was nowhere to be found. Having seen once again what a tight rein Ainz kept on his followers, Jircniv steeled his resolve and forged ahead.

This is it.

He licked his dry lips.

Jircniv readied the plan that seemed the best out of all those he had thought up in this short time.

“You will turn this land into your country and rule it as king. I think it’s a splendid idea and a fitting position for you, Sir Gown. And we in the empire would like to back you as much as we can and help you build your nation. What do you say?”

Ainz’s fleshless, skinless face didn’t move at all. But Jircniv had the feeling the flames in his eyes burned brighter.

“...Sir Jircniv. I don’t see anything in that for you, but...?”

It was an utterly natural and therefore anticipated question. So Jircniv did his very best act in reply. “I hope for the empire to maintain a friendly relationship with the country you will rule. I’m looking ahead, you see.”

“Aha. Then that sounds good.”

Jircniv was shocked to receive such nonchalant agreement. It was like his blow had been dodged. He never imagined the discussion would go so smoothly.

For one thing...

Why doesn’t he demand our subordination? Why does he just accept my proposal when he holds such absolute power while occupying an overwhelmingly superior position?

Jircniv had been considering an innumerable number of potential steps he could take if that demand were to come. But he hadn’t anticipated the reply he actually got.

What is he after?

Jircniv couldn’t read Ainz Ooal Gown.

When fighting a powerful adversary, the weaker party’s strategy naturally becomes a search for a way to undermine the stronger one. It could also be called the technique of using an opponent’s arrogance against them. But if the opponent wasn’t proud, that method was useless. The weakling’s only means of fighting lost all meaning.

Ainz was precisely that type of person. He did nothing that resembled a strong man’s arrogance.

No...

This must all be part of his plan, too. It’s definitely plausible. His reply came so fast. I must be taking the actions he had in mind, then.

It hit him that the horror of Ainz lay not only in the power he possessed but also in his wisdom.

“O-oh. Great. Th-then if there’s something you wish of us right

away, would you let me know?"

"I can't think of anything at the moment. But I would like to establish a way to contact you, perhaps by leaving a representative somewhere with you."

If this was all according to Ainz's plan, there was no way he didn't have anything in mind. So was it just a coincidence?

Well, no, that in itself could be a bluff. Maybe he thought if he jumped at it, his intentions would be an open book. This monster's got a head on his shoulders. No—it's because he's a monster that he has an extraordinary mind.

"Aah, that's a good idea. I'm quite stupid for not thinking of that myself. I'd expect nothing less of you, Sir Gown."

"...Mm."

He's not into flattery, then. Hearing the indifferent response, Jircniv made a mental note.

"All right, I shall be taking my leave, but I'll have my secretary stay here. Could I have you work out the details with him...? Reaunet Vermilion!"

"Sir! I shall pour my entire being into this work!"

Jircniv couldn't see Reaunet's expression, since he was in front of him, but he could sense the resolve in his voice. This meeting could determine the fate of the empire. If it wasn't imperative to return to the empire at once and form an Ainz Ooal Gown task force, he would have liked to stay himself.

"That's a good answer. I can sense how loyal you are to your emperor. For my part, I'll have Demiurge do the talking. He was impertinent earlier, but you've forgiven that, so I'll leave the details up to him."

After silently sizing up the bowing frog-faced monster in the corner of his vision, Jircniv had a hunch he was going to lose one of his brilliant subordinates. As such, he had to work extremely hard not to let his eyes blaze in hatred as he gazed at Ainz Ooal Gown.

So he's already made his first move!

The frog monster, Demiurge, could manipulate people with his voice. He would definitely use that to turn Reaunet into a puppet. So he wants to extract sensitive imperial intelligence?

This isn't how you deal with an ally. But it's awfully sly of him to tell us his plan. Demiurge...doesn't seem terribly smart. Is he having him do this mentally demanding work so he can make excuses when his subordinate takes matters into his own hands and spies on the empire? Ainz Ooal Gown is one surprise after another, the bastard!

Stringing together curses in his head, he was still impressed.

Ainz had probably arranged for that slipup earlier so Jircniv wouldn't be able to say he didn't see that sort of thing coming. If

Jircniv had an issue with this setup, he needed to say so now. If he let this chance go by, it was possible he would be accused of giving tacit permission.

He moved to speak, but Ainz was faster.

“Demiurge is my trusted aide. If the two of them talk, I’m sure it will go well.”

“Oh, good.” Jircniv forced himself to smile.

He had never met someone who so fully embodied the phrase *never misses a chance*. The statement had carried such weight, there was nothing else Jircniv could say in response.

But he saw how naive he was when Ainz continued.

“Now then, unlike before, you’re an ally, Jircniv. I couldn’t bear to just send you off like this. You’ve come all this way, so how would you like to spend the night? I’ll take good care of you!”

He wants to trap all of us, not just Reaunet?!

Or maybe he had something even worse in store. There had to be some reason he was suggesting they stay over. The knowing smile hideously warping Demiurge’s face felt like utter disaster.

“No, no, that won’t be necessary. I’ve got a lot of preparations to make, so I must get back.”

“Oh? That’s too bad. Then would you like me—or rather, one of my servants—to give you a lift?”

The thought of himself riding a dragon made him a bit curious about Ainz’s offer, but he cleared it from his mind. There was no way it would end with just that, and he didn’t want to be creating debts, either.

“I thank you for your kind offer, but we did come by carriage. I think we’ll stick with that.”

“A headless undead horse could drive you without rest...”

“...I’m touched, but no thanks.”

“If you say so.”

Was the hint of disappointment he heard an act? Or was it genuine? Jircniv couldn’t tell. Of course, there was a good possibility it was an act.

In any case, at this uncertain stage, he wanted to avoid announcing the fact that the empire had formed an alliance with this undead creature Ainz.

Even if he put aside the knight-order priests he had brought with him, Jircniv had no idea how the influential shrine priests would react if he came home riding an undead horse that was filled with hatred for all living things.

“Okay, I’ll be going now.”

“Then, Demiurge, see our guests out.”

“Th-that won’t be necessary... You have these beautiful maids;

perhaps we could ask them? I've never seen such lovely ladies."

Ainz cocked his head, seeming perplexed.

How annoying...

Jircniv desperately suppressed the fury beneath his faint smile.

Ainz was clearly doing this to be disagreeable because he could tell the humans were wary of Demiurge. He had no intention of building friendly relations with the empire. Surely Ainz's aim was to wordlessly teach him how this hierarchy would work.

How evil... This was a crisis for the human race!

"Oh, thank you. Then tell the maids standing by outside. This is a great day, the birth of our alliance. I'd like to make it a holiday."

You mean like Slave Day?! Without expressing so much as a squeak of his internal scream externally, Jircniv smiled at Ainz. "Indeed. Yes, indeed."

4

The meeting had ended, and the guardians—Albedo, Demiurge, Aura, Mare, Cocytus, and Shalltear—plus Sebas were in Ainz's quarters.

Ainz told them to rise from their prostrate positions.

He put his elbows on the desk and folded his hands together, concealing half his face behind them.

The stomach he supposedly didn't have pained him. *Here it comes.* That's how he felt when he looked over at Demiurge and Albedo.

He couldn't sense any anger. And no one seemed disgusted.

But who could prove those weren't poker faces? No, as he looked around with that thought in mind, their expressions began to stiffen in anger.

I wanna run away. Why am I sitting here...? No, it's too late. Once the milk is spilled, you can't put it back in the jug. Prepare yourself, Ainz Ooal Gown!

The sensation like stomach cramps eased a bit, but he still felt something like nausea.

When he heard the emperor had come to Nazarick as scheduled, he asked Demiurge in a roundabout way what he should do, but the response was simply, "Everything is going according to plan, so you can just proceed as you have been."

I don't know what that plan is!

There was no way he could say that.

As the absolute ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, he had to live up to the expectations of the children, the NPCs. It was all he could do

to put on a dauntless king's smile and say, "I see."

Ainz took Demiurge's suggestions and ran around without really knowing what was going on.

So the only way he could go into the meeting with Emperor Jircniv Rune Farlord El Nix was to think, *Que será, será*. But let's just say it: He didn't feel he had negotiated properly.

Ainz looked over at them again, awaiting his score.

This is just like a job interview.

He had done any number of interviews when he joined adult society, and they had all been accompanied by this sort of nervousness.

"So the emperor has moved according to expectations."

Here Ainz paused for a breath, but just as he was about to continue, someone interrupted.

"Lord Ainz. I beg your pardon, but may I ask a question? Why did you give that human emperor supporter status? Why not simply conquer the empire with our might?"

Shalltear's question made his nonexistent heart pound.

In order to pursue world conquest, the first step was to put pressure on the empire. That was why he allowed the imperial capital's attack on Nazarick and then used that threat as a way to lure the emperor into discussion. At that time, the head idea was to demonstrate Nazarick's overwhelming fighting power. That had been the general plan.

That's all Ainz knew. He had no idea about why it was necessary to demonstrate their military might to the emperor or any other details.

So of course he didn't have an answer to Shalltear's question.

Aura spoke next.

"Shalltear's right. We barged into their capital. They weren't so tough."

Ainz surveyed the room, and all the guardians seemed to have the same doubt.

They had not the slightest intention of going against their master's decision, but even if they believed he was most correct, they couldn't help but have questions.

They also thought that if they knew why Ainz had made that choice, they would be able to be of more use to him.

If they went ahead without understanding, there was a good chance they would do something against his wishes. That anxiety was most noticeable in those who had already committed an error, Shalltear and Sebas. Both of them wore extremely earnest expressions and made sure they didn't miss a single word or a fragment of his intentions.

Under the pressure of everyone's gazes, Ainz tried to think of a way to get through the situation.

First, I have to decide if I accept or reject Shalltear's and Aura's opinions. If I accept them, then this is just part of the plan to conquer the empire. If I reject them, then I have no current plans to conquer the empire... I wonder if Demiurge and Albedo feel the same way. Oh, crap. I'm taking too long...

Ainz chuckled in a way he thought made him sound invincible.

Then he heaved a sigh.

The odds were one in two.

If he got it wrong, all he had to do was find a way to perform course correction, and—

Shalltear has been messing up all the time, so I should oppose her idea!

"That would be foolish, Shalltear."

It couldn't just be a trick of his vision that the gleams in all the guardians' eyes grew brighter. They were hanging on his every word or, rather, trying to pick up every drop of clarity spilling from his brain.

It's rotten, but whatever!

Ainz turned to Demiurge. He took great pains to keep it from looking like he needed help. "Demiurge."

He hoped this clever fellow would grasp what he wanted if he just called his name.

"My lord! Please forgive we incompetents who cannot comprehend your ideas."

"E-er, I think 'incompetent' is going too far."

"My apologies. Please forgive me!"

"...Uh, sure."

That's not what I'm talking about. Why won't you say anything else? This is bad. I don't really think calling on Demiurge again will help... Why didn't he give me the answer?

"Albedo."

"I'm moved practically to tears by your kindness, Lord Ainz. I could expect nothing else from our ruler, the absolute king!"

".....All right, then."

He wanted an answer more than praise.

But there was no one else from whom he could seek help.

Ainz braced himself and delivered his own conclusion.

"We need a good reason."

"WE DO?"

"Of course. It would be easy to conquer them with might, yes, but we would make too many enemies that way. These aren't primitive opponents like the lizardmen. If I had to explain it to someone, this is what I would say: 'We were living here minding our own business

when the empire sent in workers to steal our treasures. We got mad and killed them, and when we had the empire apologize, they said they would make us a country if we forgave them.' That's why I'm having the emperor cooperate with us."

"I see. But, Lord Ainz, will whoever wanted the explanation be satisfied with that?"

"It doesn't matter, because it's the truth."

That was what a good reason was. And Ainz hadn't said anything untrue.

"Oh, s-so then, is that why you, uh, had the emperor come all the way here?"

"Hmm? What do you mean, Mare?"

"Oh, umm, because if you negotiated in the empire, it's possible there would have been all sorts of proof left behind, so maybe you spoke with him here where nothing would leak to the outside world. At least, that's what I was thinking."

"Ha-ha-ha! You're right. Very good, Mare."

Mare smiled bashfully.

Looking at that adorable face, Ainz was impressed. It was certainly true that any negotiations in the empire might have left evidence behind. But only a limited number of people visited him here, and it wasn't as if they did any paperwork. That would work in his favor when someone wanted to investigate the truth of the matter.

Impressed with Demiurge's wisdom in having the emperor come to Nazarick, Ainz looked at the guardians.

"Making a country will mean we have more to protect. There isn't anyone to praise the name Ainz Ooal Gown in ruined countries. Now, is there anyone else who thought of something?"

He wondered if anyone else had realized something like Mare had.

The guardians all looked to Demiurge. They probably thought that, since he had the best intellect and functioned as their leader, he would have some idea. Ainz strongly agreed with them.

"Neh-heh-heh-heh." Demiurge's laugh echoed. "Do you guys really think that's all there is to Lord Ainz's plan?"

"Tee-hee-hee."

"Huh?"

"Huh?"

"What do you mean?"

"WHAT?"

"Ah."

"...Huh?"

"Think a little bit, everyone. Do you really believe our master, the leader of the Supreme Beings, only thought things out that far?"

Ainz felt like he'd been punched and gulped, despite not having

any spit, as the guardians all nodded in understanding.

Why are you raising the hurdle?!

He was probably lucky no one could detect his internal scream.

“Exactly. Hearing a simple answer and thinking you know his full intentions is too hasty. That’s why he doesn’t tell us the most profound parts!”

The guardians besides Demiurge and Albedo, unable to grasp Ainz’s true intentions, looked a little humiliated. They must have been wondering if they could be of any use to Ainz with the heads on their shoulders.

Ainz was deeply grateful to be in his current body. It was so easy to maintain a poker face.

“Oh, brother... Well, Lord Ainz, perhaps you should tell my colleagues your true aims? They’ll be involved in the plan going forward, so...”

All eyes focused on Ainz. Their eyes pleaded, *Please teach us; we’re so stupid.*

He looked around at their faces, inhaled once—no, he took several deep breaths.

Then he slowly stood up. He turned his back to the guardians and praised Demiurge over his shoulder.

“...Brilliant as always, Demiurge. And captain of the guardians, Albedo. To think you discovered all my aims... Wow.”

“No, you’ve thought it out so well. I could never follow all the way. I’m sure what I’ve grasped is only a part of your scheme.” Demiurge bowed in return. “I heard the maids calling you ‘the Resourceful King,’ and I think that’s the perfect nickname. It’s amazing that you’ve had this plan in mind since the time you created Momon the adventurer. With a plot like that, you won’t end up with any ruined countries.”

Ainz nodded proudly, but questions whirled within him.

...What is he talking about? Momon? What does that adventurer from E-Rantel have to do with this conversation?

“What do you mean?” Shalltear’s voice was surely filled with jealousy because only those other two had entered the realm of the master they worshipped.

Demiurge wore a faint smile, while Albedo’s was that of a victor. In response, Aura was pouting with her cheeks puffed out, too.

“Lord Ainz, please tell us, too. Then we’ll be able to be more useful to you!”

“U-uh, p-please tell me! Please!”

“I’M SURE WE’RE SUPPOSED TO UNDERSTAND WITHOUT AN EXPLANATION, BUT PLEASE FORGIVE OUR IGNORANCE.”

“Could you also tell me, too, please?”

The voices had something frantic about them.

Ainz put a hand over his eyes, still facing away from them. He had the illusion the stress was making him dizzy.

It makes us happy to serve and be of use to you, Supreme One.

Multiple voices said essentially the same thing.

Unable to answer the pleading guardians, Ainz's heart was racked with guilt. The strong emotion should have been suppressed, but the pain was too great to be muffled.

Perhaps I should just be honest about what a fool I am?

But so many things wouldn't allow the words to come out of Ainz's mouth.

He cast off his indecision, turned around, and pointed forcefully at Demiurge with his staff, the proof that he was guild master.

"Demiurge. I permit you to explain to the others what you've understood."

"Yes, my lord." Demiurge nodded and began speaking to the others.

5

Was the reason the vibrations through the carriage felt bigger, even though nothing about the vehicle's structure had changed, because the atmosphere inside it was so heavy? Or perhaps because the passengers were different?

Instead of Fluder, one of his leading disciples, and instead of Reaunet, one of his subordinate secretaries. The other two hadn't changed: the owner of the carriage, Jircniv, and Baswood.

The reason Fluder wasn't there was that he said he wanted to discuss what they'd seen with his disciples. So Jircniv had invited the leading disciple, who was second only to Fluder—albeit with quite a gap.

At this same time in Fluder's carriage, a no doubt passionate discussion was raging.

That was the exact opposite of this carriage. In Jircniv's carriage, there was only silence.

Only the heavy atmosphere ruled.

It was like that because of Jircniv. Because of his hard, sour expression.

Everyone knew Jircniv, despite fearing him as the Fresh Blood Emperor, as a man who always wore a slight grin. And it was an act he put on. He needed to show the masses that he was a strong

emperor. Unless the one out front was bold, the ones who followed would be uneasy.

Of the three present, Baswood knew him best, but even he had probably never seen this expression on him before. And that was why everyone just sat stiffly in their seats saying nothing.

Though he sensed their eyes on him, Jircniv still didn't feel like talking.

They all knew why.

No, if anyone thought anything else, Jircniv would have split their heads open to take a look at their brains. When else would he get the chance to see a brain the size of a pinkie fingernail?

The Great Tomb of Nazarick...? Calling that a tomb was misleading.

It's the castle of a demon king...

That crowd of horrors. And the being beyond them...

Death seated on a crystal throne.

And it wasn't just fear he felt.

The shining buildings of concentrated luxury, the numerous furnishings... It all had him in awe.

Jircniv was adept at politics, so he knew what ordeals the empire would go through in the coming days facing this being whose power in military, financial, and other spheres was without compare.

Having someone strong at the top of their country put citizens at ease. Conversely, even if a nation had strength, the people would be anxious if the top was a lamb. Luckily, the empire was a lion in both body and mind. But here came a country that was a dragon. How would that make the imperial subjects feel?

Jircniv looked down at his hands, white-knuckled from clenching them too long.

No, not yet. Our defeat is not set in stone just yet.

He smiled. It was a smile that suited the Fresh Blood Emperor.

As if they were waiting for that nasty expression, the faces of his subordinates relaxed. Seeing that, Jircniv put on a faint but genuine grin.

"Don't keep peeking at me! It's distracting."

"Your Majesty!"

All three voices overlapped. Hearing their joy that their emperor had returned, Jircniv felt he knew what had to be done and nodded firmly.

"First, let's make sure there are no discrepancies among the way each of us here felt in that place. If anyone has a different opinion, bring it up. Even if it's off topic, that's fine... Okay, for starters, let's

think about the ruler of the Great Tomb of Nazarick, Ainz Ooal Gown.”

After leaving a beat, Jircniv gave his honest impressions of the exceptional monster.

“Ainz Ooal Gown is a monster among monsters who can create death knights with no trouble at all. If he became our enemy, I imagine the empire would be destroyed. And even if our relationship is not hostile, there is still a good chance living things could be killed for fun. Any objections?”

“No, sir.”

“You’re absolutely right, Your Majesty.”

“No, I agree with you. If I was to add something, it’d be that I don’t think a human can beat him. I don’t even think anyone could get close enough to him to wield a sword—even if we sent the whole imperial army.”

Upon receiving the three men’s opinions, Jircniv continued. “Also, he reigns as an absolute ruler, and he seems to have the proper charms of a king.”

“Yeah, he was awesome. He’s more charismatic than our emperor!”

“Sir Baswood!”

“That’s fine. It’s true. I think there was only one time he displayed his actual emotions, but it sure had a conqueror’s impact.”

“You mean when he said, ‘Enough. Silence,’ right?”

Jircniv nodded slightly at his secretary’s confirmation.

The attitude Ainz Ooal Gown had displayed with that reprimand was truly that of the king of the Great Tomb of Nazarick.

“And...what’s more terrifying is that this monster is smart. He’s that rare breed of schemer whose every move has a meaning... Don’t look so confused, you guys. Think about it. Everything that happened from the moment I arrived went according to his plan. If it hadn’t, there’s no way he would have let us leave so easily. That monster with that much power is trying to win not with might but with strategy! He’s not merely strong.”

He was the type that was harder to deal with.

“Next, we should think about his subordinates. Give me your opinions.”

He wanted to hear the others’ thoughts, so he urged them to speak.

“The ones lined up near the front must have been his aides, right? Was the woman with wings standing next to Gown...his queen? That was how her attitude struck me.”

The peerless beauty in the white dress.

Her faint smile wasn’t kind, but even so, it was so alluring that he

felt his heart nearly waver. She was so beautiful, there must be guys who lost to the desire to have her smile at them.

He had sensed that the black wings at her hips weren't a magic item or part of her outfit. They were too natural. There were races with wings, like birdmen, but it seemed to him that she was probably one of the residents of the netherworld called demons.

"Maybe. She could be Ainz Ooal Gown's wife. But if he has a wife, then, how do they...? Is just his face all bones? Or is he wearing a mask?"

"Who knows?" Jircniv shrugged, but he didn't get the feeling that it was a mask. He didn't think it was an illusion, either.

"Then there was that guy Demiurge who can control people with his voice... Is he a bard? Is he good at singing 'cause he's a frog?"

Bard powers involved performing with instruments and their voices to cause special effects, similar to how Demiurge controlled people with his voice.

He'd also heard that some sprites, like Lorelei, had powers like that. But that man was definitely nothing as cute as a sprite.

"Oh, hmm. A bard? That seems likely. Then there was that one like a big bug... What was that thing?"

"Well, he could be a vermin race or... I don't know much about any besides antmen, so I'll ask Master later."

It was a wide world out there. Some races weren't very well-known, and surely mutations occurred as well. And lord races were said to change faster than normal ones, like the difference between a queen ant and worker ants. Jircniv thought something like that could be a possibility.

"So I guess what's left are the silver-haired girl and the two dark elves? Setting aside the latter two, what about the former? Judging from the amazing swell of those breasts, she's gotta be his favorite concubine!"

Everyone in the carriage winced at Baswood's remark.

"No, I doubt he would put even his favorite concubine in that lineup."

"She must be at least as strong as those dark elves."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. That could be the wrong assumption." Baswood spoke in earnest. "There's no doubt that the ones lined up there were close to that monster, but that doesn't mean they all have to be strong. I mean, think about it. If Your Majesty had a hundred of me as your aides, just because I'm strong, don't you think politics in the empire would break down and fall apart? Basically, she might be an aide who was chosen for a reason besides strength. Maybe his favorite concubine is really smart! Maybe she keeps things running smoothly inside that castle pretending to be a tomb."

Someone said, "I see."

Jircniv could also agree.

Distracted by Ainz Ooal Gown's immense power, they had assumed that the silver-haired girl had to be strong just because she was standing next to those two dark elves. Of course, it was possible that her power was just as formidable as the dark elves, but he didn't want to go in with preconceptions and have it bite them later.

"I guess that's about it?" Jircniv looked at the others. "Your opinions were all things I was thinking, too. But hmm, if his aides had all been undead, that would have been at least some relief...but it seems like he had all kinds of different monsters."

"Well, it was less like a monster trade fair and more like he's found the ones that can do the job."

Jircniv smiled faintly at how Baswood refused to mince words.

"Right. From what we know, it seems like it would make sense to investigate some more. As for other things I want to exchange thoughts on... The magnificence of that castle. A place that splendid should be mentioned in legends or something, wouldn't you think?"

"My humble apologies, but I don't know. As soon as we reach the capital, I'll make a detailed search into myths and so on."

Jircniv generously accepted the leading disciple's apology. "All right, thanks. But did anyone think of anything? I can't imagine an evil monster built such a heavenly residence. Did you see anything that might have been a clue? Is that place even a tomb? Does it have anything to do with the region's history?"

There was no response.

Proof that everyone had the same question.

The possibility that it was teleported beneath the tomb from some other place, perhaps even from the alternate world of demons, was hard to discount. Or rather, that idea made the most sense.

"I guess we can't reach a conclusion. We just don't have enough information. We'll need to get as much as we can from Vermilion and whoever comes to us from them. Got it?"

"Of course. I'll do my best without arousing hostility or suspicion."

"Your best had better be good enough. His war potential is far greater than the empire's. Take care not to destroy our fake alliance."

His secretary bowed his head, and Jircniv felt a little bit of the burden lift off his shoulders.

"...I've done a horrible thing to those others we brought along."

Perhaps that was why he brought up the people who had been crammed in the carriages and not set a foot outside—the girls he thought he would give to Ainz Ooal Gown.

In any world, sex was liable to be weaponized. Perhaps the

empire's intelligence agency should have prepared some people skilled in exploiting that, but since there would have been trouble if they were found out via magic, he decided to gather up some innocent girls.

"Well, it was probably bad for their spirits to have to go through bidding a final farewell to their families, but they must be happy with this outcome, don't you think?"

"I wonder. Just managing to become a favorite concubine of that monster would be amazing."

"Any woman who would be happy to sleep with that monster has nerves of steel."

Baswood implied that no human could feel that way, but Jircniv knew that was naive. He had seen enough women's hidden struggles, like how his mother had poisoned her husband, to be confident about that.

"Women are more courageous than men think, and they act out of emotion and for profit. I'm sure there are women who would be unfazed by sleeping with a skeleton king. In that sense, maybe we got lucky. A woman might have conned Ainz Ooal Gown into killing me."

The others grinned, but Jircniv felt it could have happened.

He knew how the nobles hated him for the many reforms he had pushed through with state power. Of course, he had allies as well, but the only ones he could really trust were his aides and Fluder...

Then a question fluttered down on him like a feather.

It was about Fluder.

Fluder was his teacher, an important figure in the empire, and its trump card. He was the empire's greatest hero, and Jircniv respected him. He also knew that when you removed the wise-man veneer, a thirst to touch the depths of magic, like a madness, swirled below. Which was why the question remained.

He wasn't himself.

Ainz Ooal Gown was clearly a great caster who surpassed Fluder. He could create with ease the death knights Fluder failed to control. So why did Fluder follow Jircniv out of the tomb without a word?

Normally, Gramps would have asked that horrible monster for magic knowledge. He would have gotten down on all fours and thrown himself at his feet...

It was so easy to imagine.

But he didn't do anything. He didn't even ask about it. Like he wasn't even himself... Could something...have happened to him?

Everyone bowed down according to Demiurge's order. But maybe that was only a distraction, and his real aim was to put Fluder under some sort of mind control?

Jircniv didn't really think Ainz Ooal Gown would want Fluder as

an underling. Fluder may have been the empire's trump card, but in Ainz's world, with so many powerful monsters, Fluder's abilities would hardly be noticeable.

But maybe the knowledge he had amassed was valuable. And besides that, if Ainz Ooal Gown controlled Fluder, the empire's military strength would plummet, and at the same time, it would lose its trump card in the fight against him.

They would be put under the yoke of slavery.

Is that it? What else could it be? Why else wouldn't Gramps have said anything...? Because he already knew? Did he already know how powerful Ainz Ooal Gown was?

That moment, it was like lightning struck him.

Cold sweat oozed from every pore.

"Your Majesty? Your Majesty? What's wrong? You're awfully pale all of a sudden. Shall I call a prie—?"

"—need."

"Eh?"

"I said, 'No need,' because...it's not necessary."

With a glance at his puzzled subordinate, he tried to get sucked back into his thoughts, but...

Am I scared?

His ideas were all jumbled, and he couldn't pull them together. It was almost as if he was averting his eyes, as if thinking about what came next was forbidden.

No! Running away will only invite the worst possible scenario later! Calm down. Just calm down. Calm yourself and think.

Jircniv concentrated on his thoughts despite the strange looks he was receiving.

If Gramps—if he knew about Ainz Ooal Gown's powers... I mean, if he already knew about those abilities, then I can understand why he wasn't acting like himself. Does he have some kind of connection to that monster behind the scenes? It can't be!

He didn't have the wherewithal to worry about his subordinates' surprise and concern at his rapidly changing expression.

No, it can't be, Jircniv. Gramps saw that death knight and was shocked to his core. Which means he didn't know about Ainz Ooal Gown's powers... Well, no, it doesn't. Right. What if Gr—Fluder didn't know he could give orders to death knights but still knew he was a great caster?

It was as if the pieces were coming together one by one to create a beautiful—no, horrifying—picture.

So that monster and Fluder knew each other. Since when, though...? From the beginning? Yes. The one who discovered people entering and leaving the tomb and the one who suggested we send workers in was Fluder.

It was like a thread had connected.

When he thought of it like that, most of the questions began to make sense.

“So he betrayed me. I see. He betrayed me. He sold the empire.”

It was a resentful voice from the depths of hell. Or perhaps the cry of a child?

The atmosphere wasn't such that his subordinates felt asking would be permitted, so they watched him in silence. He turned to look at them.

“Fluder Paradyne betrayed us. What is the damage to the empire in this case? Can a sinecure be arranged?”

Everyone's eyes nearly popped out of their heads at the unbelievable accusation.

“Y-your Majesty. Could that really be? Surely you must be joking.”

The leading disciple's comment sent rage spouting from the pit of Jircniv's stomach. He wanted to shout, *I'm not interested in your opinions!* but held back. The reason he reined in the outburst was that Jircniv the child was still there in a corner of his mind.

He had—unfortunately—grown up surrounded by the enormous amount of plotting that lay beneath the facade of noble society. He dispelled the passionate fury in his belly by taking a breath.

“I'll say it again. Fluder Paradyne has betrayed us. What is the damage to the empire in this case?”

His subordinates looked at one another. After communicating with their eyes for a few seconds, the leading disciple spoke as their representative. “Unimaginable damage that would make you want to cover your eyes. We've been able to coerce other countries with the mere suggestion of Master's existence. That's why the empire has never fallen prey to foreign schemes.”

When he looked to the secretary for confirmation, the man nodded with a deathly pale face.

“If word got out that we pushed him into a sinecure, it would give the other countries room to maneuver.”

“But the empire has an intelligence agency, doesn't it? Oh, I see. Hmph. Thanks to Fluder, they don't have much experience, huh?”

“As you so wisely point out. Your Majesty, do you really—?”

“The probability is shockingly high,” Jircniv asserted, cutting the secretary off. “Ahh, but I have such a mountain of things to do. First, I have to decide who will take Fluder's place. Is there anyone good?”

Noticing the flames of ambition blaze up in the leading disciple's eyes, Jircniv laughed in his head.

Fluder's position, principal court wizard, must have been incredibly appealing.

Since such a great hero had been in it up until now, it wasn't a

position that could be reached. Anyone would be too outclassed to even aspire to it. That job, over which absolute resignation used to reign, was now right in front of him.

Ambition spurs people, generates the power for them to act. I acknowledge your ambition. But I need to ask you this first.

“Because you know, the next principal court wizard may have to fight a magic duel against the monster.”

The disciple’s ambition was immediately extinguished. He no longer had the slightest interest. To the leading disciple, principal court wizard was suddenly the least desirable job in the world.

Plunging off a thousand-foot cliff into stormy waters offered a better chance of survival than competing against Ainz Ooal Gown with magic.

Actually, it was possible that dying was the better choice.

His face looked like that’s what he was thinking, and his eyes had the same shine as a cornered mouse’s.

Jircniv abandoned his expectations, having learned that this man didn’t have the courage to duel Ainz Ooal Gown. It was wrong to have expected anything in the first place.

“I-i-in that case, there are some disciples who can use tier-four spells, so what if we chose one of them? I can use them, too, but, well, I’m no expert.”

“I heard you were the most talented of the leading disciples...”

“O-oh no, no! Some are more powerful than me. I’ll suggest some candidates later on.”

Of course, Jircniv understood that being asked to fight such a colossal monster would crush anyone’s resolve. What he sought was someone with the courage to do it anyway.

...This is no good. And it won’t help to assume this disciple is an exception. We can probably assume that anyone who knows about Ainz Ooal Gown won’t be brave enough to fight him. Our only choice is to leave things up to someone who hasn’t confronted him yet. Someone ignorant will get the same gleam in their eyes as this guy just did and work their ass off for me.

It wasn’t a good idea, but it was his only option.

“...I see. Then we’ll hold interviews after you’ve put together some details on the candidates. And we should probably start preparing our response. For now, we’ll cooperate and obey like a dog in order to build friendly relations.”

“Understood.”

No one objected to the phrase *like a dog*. Well, how could they, after laying eyes on the Great Tomb of Nazarick?

“So, Your Majesty, how long will we allow ourselves to be wagged as that monster’s tail? Until our grandchildren’s generation? Our

great-grandchildren's generation?"

Jircniv looked around. He wanted to make sure there were no spies and that the doors weren't open. Once he determined the coast was clear, he spoke of the strategy he'd had in mind ever since his meeting with Ainz Ooal Gown.

"Our goal is to join the empire, the kingdom, the Theocracy, the council state, and the sacred kingdom into a single grand alliance. We'll establish a massive united front to oppose Ainz Ooal Gown."

Six wide eyes stared at Jircniv.

"Why are you surprised? The empire can't win against that monster by itself. Our only choice is to get the surrounding countries involved to defeat him."

"W-we're going to fight?"

"We'll fight," Jircniv stated curtly. "There's no other way for us to survive."

"Then why are you helping that monster establish a country?!"

"That's the first step in building the grand alliance." Jircniv looked each of his carriage mates in the face. "Listen. This land—the outskirts of E-Rantel—is an area where the interests of the kingdom, the Theocracy, and the empire clash. If Gown sets up a country here, he'll naturally be considered a potential enemy to all three countries."

Jircniv paused for a breath and then continued.

"And another thing. He's undead. I don't think he can govern humans—or any living things. I mean, I don't think our subjects would submit to an undead. Do you? They'll definitely revolt, and then that monster will crack down on them. The kingdom will have to act, after being forced to give up their territory. And I have no doubt the strongest country in the region, the Slane Theocracy, will make a move as well."

"B-but, Your Majesty! If we help him create his country, it'll look like we're siding with that monster. The other countries will definitely be wary of us! The empire will be excluded from the grand alliance! Even if they managed to take out that monster, the empire would be next. They might even get rid of us first."

"Heh," Jircniv scoffed. "We'll work behind the scenes. It'll be important to convince them we're spying on Gown's country. I know it'll be difficult, but it's the only way."

"Do you think anyone will believe it? If it were me, I'd assume it's a trap."

"That will depend on Ainz Ooal Gown's power. The best will be if we can show everyone how immensely powerful he is... We'll have to think of a way to talk to him about that. For example, maybe he could demonstrate his strength on the battlefield."

"Couldn't the empire have avoided supporting him and left things

vaguer?”

Jircniv turned his eyes on his secretary like he was looking at an idiot. “In order to secure a bare-minimum security, we have to play both sides. What’s the point of siding with the kingdom if Gown just seizes all the land in the region?”

Jircniv was choosing the least awful option.

“For those reasons, the empire will pretend to back that monster while actually supporting the alliance. Clearly, if that comes out, there’s a high probability the beast will aim to crush us first. At least, if it were me, I’d make an example out of us, for sure.”

“Ahh yeah, that you would, Your Majesty.”

“...I’ll take that as a compliment. Anyway, this is why we can’t be the ones to propose the grand alliance. We need those countries to form it of their own accord. We need to focus on gathering intelligence from within Nazarick. At the same time, we search for anyone who might be able to defeat him.”

“Do you really think someone like that exists?” The leading disciple asked this in a tone that made it clear he had no confidence a person like that would turn up, but he posed the question anyway. Someone who could defeat that unrivaled monster? It seemed like it would be impossible even for a dragon, the strongest race in the world.

But Jircniv’s answer was full of confidence. “Sure there is.”

“Really?!”

“There were! In that Throne Room.”

Then the disciple understood.

He meant the monsters lined up around Ainz: Aura, Mare, the silver-haired girl, the insect, and Demiurge.

“You’re going to make them defect?”

“I don’t really think I’m capable of that, but it’s still worth a shot. We’ll prepare money, status, and members of the opposite sex to see if we can attract them even slightly to our side.”

“It seems like a long shot...”

“Of course, but that goes without saying. Ainz Ooal Gown has the air of a high king. No one with a ruler like that is going to readily betray him. But we must act nonetheless. This isn’t a mere dispute between states.”

Jircniv eyed the other three with determination.

“This is a fight for the continued existence of the human race. It’s a fight to protect the future. We’ve got to wager our bodies and souls.”

“—So I think that’s how this emperor will think and then act. If he was more foolish, he might do something unexpected, but I think the chances of that are quite slim. It’s convenient that these middling thinkers are easier to read than idiots,” Demiurge said, holding up a finger.

“Do you mean that he desires to form an alliance with the intent to destroy us—and Lord Ainz?”

“Mm, I dunno, he seems pretty stupid to me.”

“U-umm, would it be better for us to make the first move and crush them?”

Shalltear’s disgusted comment was closely followed by Aura’s and Mare’s input; none of them seemed angry. It was as if they were talking about picking a pebble up off the ground.

“The bigger problem is—”

Sebas began to speak, but his sentence was finished for him.

“—Are you saying that he plans to convince us to betray Lord Ainz?”

“EXACTLY, SEBAS. THAT EMPEROR DOESN’T KNOW THE MEANING OF THE WORD *LOYALTY*.”

Everyone scoffed.

Ainz and the Forty-One Supreme Beings created them. Did those humans really think they would betray their creators?

Of course, all this supposition was merely Demiurge’s guess, but even that seemed to make the guardians very uncomfortable; they all had hard glints deep in their eyes.

“I don’t mean to copy Mare, but I’m kind of annoyed. Couldn’t we just crush them?”

Something dark had come over Aura for the first time, and Shalltear smiled at her.

“Transforming them into vampires would be the best. If they were high quality, we could put them to work in Nazarick.”

Cocytus didn’t say anything, but he began clicking a warning sound.

“Everyone, Lord Ainz is present.”

Shalltear’s, Aura’s, and Cocytus’s anger subsided in response to Sebas’s levelheaded voice.

“Ho-ho... That’s right, everyone, please calm down. Remember what Demiurge said. This is all according to expectations. If you don’t enjoy the clowns performing their comedy routine, then what is left? The appropriate response from us is admiration—because everything is happening according to Lord Ainz’s plan. Right, Lord Ainz?”

Huh... Ainz’s plan? Seems like some guy with the same name as me has come up with some special plan. And I guess part of that plan is that the Baharuth emperor will create an alliance to oppose Nazarick... I don’t

get it at all. I'd like to ask that Ainz guy what it's all about.

...He couldn't run away from reality forever.

Ainz wanted to make a clean break, tell them he actually had no plan, then ask what kind of misunderstandings Demiurge and Albedo were operating under.

But there was no way he could do that.

Ainz looked at Albedo anew without moving his eyes.

What he saw was a woman who seemed to be dripping sticky honey. Her entranced eyes were moist, her cheeks slightly rosy.

It was a reaction to her belief that everything was going according to his plan—she was in love with his wisdom.

It was too late to deny everything. Who in this situation would be able to ask, *What are we talking about exactly?*

There was only one thing Ainz could say in response to Albedo's question.

“Tha...t's right.”

He wanted to pat himself on the back for suppressing the tremors in his voice.

The guardians oohed in respect.

“...Tee-hee-hee.” As Albedo opened her arms, the wings at her hips also spread. “Lord Ainz will peacefully occupy the human cities and reign over this whole region with his love. That emperor will build an evil alliance to oppose his earthly paradise. Thus, in the not too distant future, Lord Ainz will probably teach that country what goodness is. Our cause is just!”

“That's something to look forward to. When that fool realizes he's been dancing in the palm of Lord Ainz's hand, I wonder how he'll react... You're always several moves ahead, my lord.”

After Demiurge honored Ainz with a sincere appraisal, Albedo spoke again with a respectful expression on her face.

“We are truly unable to grasp the extent of Lord Ainz's wisdom. Without the hero, Momon, he created, a peaceful takeover would have been impossible, and he would have had to rule E-Rantel through fear and violence.”

“...He might have used the Golden Princess instead, but that would have been a waste of one of our cards. As I found in my analysis of the intelligence Sebas gathered for us, she's quite—no, she's beyond interesting. She'll be very valuable to us.”

“From what I've heard you say, I really want to meet her.”

“Then maybe you could go as a messenger to the kingdom after our country is built? We have to make good on our promise, after all.”

“...AREN'T YOU TWO GETTING OFF TOPIC? DON'T YOU THINK YOU'RE WASTING LORD AINZ'S PRECIOUS TIME?”

The pair hurriedly apologized, and Ainz said, “It's fine.”

In fact, Ainz was gleaning information from their chatter and using the time to think up excuses, so it was perfect for him.

“Ah, but you do so amaze us, Lord Ainz.”

“You said it, Shalltear. I mean, he came up with a strategy that surprised even Demiurge and Albedo...”

“M-magnificent as always, Lord Ainz. Y-you’re so cool. I—I, uh, really look up to you.”

“I’M ASHAMED OF MY LACK OF INTELLIGENCE.”

“I can’t help but feel that if I can’t keep up with your ideas, I’m useless.”

The guardians’ compliments stabbed into him like knives.

He half wondered if they were making fun of him, but the deference, respect, and adoration in their eyes were unmistakable. Ainz couldn’t say anything in response; he only carried on with his usual act.

“That’s not true. It just happened to turn out that way this time. Plus, Demiurge and Albedo, you figured it all out.”

“No, if you hadn’t handled that human the way you did, we wouldn’t have been able to guess.”

“It’s just as Demiurge says. To see ahead so far into the unknown...it’s just what you would expect from the leader of the Supreme Beings. I’ve fallen for you more than ever before.”

“Brilliant as always, Lord Ainz. To think you could outsmart the greatest intellect of Nazarick, Demiurge.”

“For real! You’re awesome, Lord Ainz!”

“Yeah! You’re awesome!”

“I KNEW YOUR ABILITIES WERE EXTRAORDINARY, LORD AINZ, BUT I DIDN’T REALIZE JUST HOW EXTRAORDINARY... YOU ARE TRULY NAZARICK’S GREAT TREASURE.”

“Indubitably. You are so compassionate and wise. There can be no greater ruler than you, Lord Ainz.”

“...Ahh...”

“Oh, that reminds me—there’s something we need to decide. I have absolutely no objection to Lord Ainz being a king, but if he’s only a king, then he’d be no different from any of those worms out there, right? I think we need to decide a more suitable title for Lord Ainz.”

The guardians unanimously approved Demiurge’s idea.

“What do you think, Lord Ainz?”

“I have no objections. Do as you like.”

Really, he felt like King Ainz Ooal Gown was fine. With *King* attached, there was a palpable increase in his status, to the point where his mental state was forcibly stabilized several times.

“Then does anyone have any suggestions?”

“I do.” Shalltear raised her hand. “I think we should pay tribute to Lord Ainz’s beauty and call him ‘the Gorgeous King.’”

The guardians oohed in appreciation.

Gorgeous King Ainz Ooal Gown?

“Now me!” Aura raised her hand next. “I think we should emphasize Lord Ainz’s strength! So ‘Power King,’ meaning a king who’s powerful, seems good to me!”

Several voiced their understanding at last.

Power King Ainz Ooal Gown?

“U-umm, can I suggest one, too? Uh, Lord Ainz is nice, so I think we should make sure everyone knows that. U-umm, s-so what about something like maybe, uh, ‘the Affectionate King?’”

The guardians all nodded.

Affectionate King Ainz Ooal Gown?

“I humbly submit”—Demiurge paused, probably for dramatic effect—“that we pay tribute to Lord Ainz’s sublime mind and call him ‘the Wise King.’”

The guardians all seemed to find that acceptable.

Wise King Ainz Ooal Gown? Sorry, anything but that, please...

“How about you, Sebas?”

In response to Albedo’s question, Sebas said, “I was thinking that just plain ‘King’ would be fine.”

“Then it’s my turn, right? Since he is the loftiest of all the Supreme Beings, I think ‘Supreme King’ would be good.”

Admiring gasps went up from the group of guardians.

Supreme King Ainz Ooal Gown? All the proposals are pretty...unique.

All eyes turned to the one guardian who hadn’t commented yet.

“How about you, Cocytus? I realize it’s hard to follow up my suggestion of ‘Supreme King,’ but do you have anything that would be a good fit for Lord Ainz?”

“...HMM. LORD AINZ WILL LIKELY GO ON TO SUBJUGATE MANY CREATURES BY WAY OF HIS SUPREME MAGICAL ABILITY. THEREFORE, I BELIEVE HE SHOULD BE KNOWN AS THE ONE WHO RULES OVER THE CREATURES OF DARKNESS AND MAGIC ITSELF—‘THE KING OF DARKNESS.’”

The guardians didn’t react immediately.

But everyone looked at Ainz. In their eyes, he saw silent agreement—they all thought there was no greater title for him than this. Albedo seemed a tiny bit disappointed, but even so—

“Very good. I’ll take Cocytus’s suggestion.”

Ainz slowly rose from his seat.

“Once my kingdom is established, I will be known as the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown!”

He waved off their shower of applause, feeling embarrassed. But it

was true that he was a bit tickled.

“All right! When the time comes for the kingdom and the empire to fight, the moment for Nazarick to show them its might will be at hand!”

“Quite right, Lord Ainz. They will try to investigate your powers, but they won’t even know that it’s part of our plan.”

Demiurge continued, seeming very pleased.

“Before negotiating, it’s important to give them one good blow to make them understand the power disparity. When the creatures known as fools don’t fully grasp the strength of their enemy, they tend to behave stupidly. In that sense, that emperor is a fool; he didn’t realize that the smartest thing for him to do was to bow his head and lick Lord Ainz’s boots.”

“I was wondering about that. Wouldn’t allowing humans to lick Lord Ainz’s boots be a reward?”

“Ohh, that’s an Albedo question if I ever heard one. But I’d rather lick his body.”

Ainz pretended he couldn’t hear Albedo and Shalltear whispering.

“...Very well, everyone. Prepare to increase the renown of Nazarick even further!”

“Yes, my lord!”

The chorus of acknowledgments echoed throughout the room.



Chapter 2 | Preparations for the Battle

1

One month later...

The court was meeting at Valencia Palace in the Re-Estize Kingdom. Gazef stood at attention beside King Ramposa III, who was seated on his throne. The captain of the Royal Select spotted the six great nobles among the many in attendance, and his eyes widened.

It was quite rare for all of them to appear at once.

The heads of those six noble houses possessed territory that was second only to the royal family's holdings in size, and each had some field—whether it was military might, financial assets, or something else—in which they surpassed the king. Consequently, when the king summoned them, they often made up some sort of excuse to be absent. In particular, Marquis Beauleurope, the leader of the anti-king faction, never bothered to hide his disdain, and for a time it seemed as though the kingdom might collapse from within.

Next, Gazef's gaze turned to the three royal children who were present.

The most eye-catching was the youngest, Princess Renner Theiere Chardelon Ryle Vaiself.

Then came the second prince, who had distinguished himself by working with the king for the people during the demon disturbance, Zanak Valléon Igana Ryle Vaiself.

Last was the eldest, Prince Barbro Andréan Yeld Ryle Vaiself, with his magnificent physique and neatly arranged hair. Marquis Beauleurope was working to make sure this prince would be the next king. He was probably attending the meeting at his request.

With Beauleurope of the nobles' faction present, the discussion was sure to get stormy. To take his mind off the bleak worry he felt, Gazef observed the other gathering great nobles.

Of the three nobles who stood in the king's faction, the one who

caught Gazef's eye first was the one wearing the most luxurious clothes out of anyone in the court, Marquis Blumrush.

He was nearing forty years of age. The fairly good-looking noble's domain held both gold and mythril mines, and the precious metals they produced were enough to provide their owner with the greatest financial power in the kingdom. But rumor said he was extremely greedy, willing to betray even his family for a single gold coin.

In truth, Gazef had heard that he was betraying the kingdom and leaking information to the empire. The only reason such a character was allowed to go unchecked was because, essentially, they couldn't produce any definitive evidence of wrongdoing. If they beheaded Blumrush, a member of the king's faction, without proof, the nobles under him would undoubtedly turn against the king. If he was taking advantage of that fact to sell intelligence to the empire, it wasn't a stretch to call him a truly terrible human being.

Next, Gazef's eyes moved to the most youthful of the great nobles, the handsome Marquis Pespea.

He had taken the king's eldest daughter as his wife and succeeded his father upon marrying. His ability and personality were still relatively unknown, but his father had been exceptional in both areas, so Gazef felt that young Pespea would eventually grow to be similar.

Meanwhile, the eldest of the six great nobles was Margrave Urovana. His hair was already completely white, and since he didn't have much left, it looked like he had almost none at all. His arms and trunk were like withered branches, but he undoubtedly still possessed the dignity of someone who had many years of experience.

Margrave Urovana was the most fascinating of the nobles, as a person.

Standing next to those three were the attendees from the nobles' faction.

First was the central figure of their faction, Marquis Beauleurope, who had the most land of any noble. He had numerous scars on his face and was a leader like a warrior. Since he was now in his fifties, his robust body, once trained to eliminate any weakness, was nothing more than a memory of past glory, but the life in his voice and his raptor-like eyes were vestiges of the warrior in him. He was losing against old age as a fighter, but as a commander, he was probably more talented than Gazef, making him a man of unmatched caliber within the kingdom.

Next to him was Count Litton.

The fox-like man was a whole notch less impressive compared to the other great nobles, so he was always trying to increase his worth in haphazard ways. If he could expand his own power, the suffering of others didn't concern him, which gave him a rather poor reputation

among the other nobles. That was why he attached himself to Marquis Beaulieu—to escape the hostility of his peers.

The last was a man who currently belonged to the nobles' faction. His blond hair was slicked back, and he had blue almond-shaped eyes. His complexion was a special pallor reserved for those who rarely saw the light of day. That combined with his tall, lean figure gave him the impression of a snake. Age-wise he should have been just under forty, but his sickly skin tone made him seem far older.

Gazef had mixed feelings about that man—Marquis Raeven; he looked away from the noble.

What made the power struggle in the palace even more complicated was the matter of who would be the next king.

Marquis Beaulieu and Count Litton from the nobles' faction and Margrave Urovana from the king's faction nominated the eldest prince, Barbro, while many, regardless of faction, backed Marquis Pespea, husband of the king's eldest daughter. Marquis Raeven supported the second prince, Zanac. Meanwhile, Marquis Blumrush acted as if the whole thing had nothing to do with him.

This situation was the reason the king was still keeping the throne warm. He suspected that if he named a successor as things stood, a civil war might break out.

Up until recently, Gazef thought it wouldn't make a difference who became king, but now he personally supported Prince Zanac. Alternatively, he would have accepted the third princess, Renner, though it was a long shot. The kingdom had never been ruled by a queen, so it was probably impossible.

"All right, let us begin."

The king's tone of voice was just a touch different from the usual. Those with sharp ears had surely already guessed the reason they had been gathered. Those who hadn't caught on earlier assumed serious expressions when they sensed the slight change in atmosphere.

"A herald came from the empire. Read the declaration he brought us."

In response to the king's order, the chamberlain standing by next to him read the parchment. Essentially, it read as follows:

The Baharuth Empire recognizes Nazarick, the organization led by the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown, as a country, and the two nations have formed an alliance.

E-Rantel and its environs originally belonged to the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown, and the Re-Estize Kingdom is unjustly occupying the land. It must be returned to its rightful owner.

If you do not comply, the empire will assist the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown, in his invasion of the kingdom to reclaim his territory.

This is an act of justice to liberate the land from wrongful rule.

The message was just so absurd. Complying could only be deemed insanity.

“We did look back through the history of the kingdom, but there is no record of an Ainz Ooal Gown occupying the E-Rantel area, so this claim is naturally invalid.”

“Then it’s just some nutcase’s nonsense—not even a real accusation,” a stirring voice barked.

As if they took courage from Marquis Beauleurope, who had a history of military achievements, other nobles began to agree.

“The timing slipped quite a bit, but isn’t this just the empire’s annual invasion? They always come up with some excuse. Maybe this time, they simply couldn’t think of anything, so they dragged out that caster’s name. ‘The King of Darkness’ is quite a title... I’d like to get a look at this guy!”

Some chuckles went up in response to Count Litton’s comments. It had originated among his followers.

“However”—the count shifted his narrowed eyes, which could be described only as fox-like, turning his gaze on Gazef with a hint of condescension—“I feel like I’ve heard this madman’s name somewhere before. Am I wrong, Captain Stronoff?”

“...It’s the name of the caster who rescued me on the outskirts of E-Rantel when I was there.”

Count Litton broke into a sinister smile and said in an icy voice, “I see, so he must have saved you because he thought you were one of his people.”

Nobles here and there suppressed their laughter. No one admonished the slight. Gazef was born a commoner, so most of the nobles’ faction hated him.

The king might have spoken up if the insult had originated from someone in his faction, but as Count Litton was from the opposing faction, he could only furrow his brow.

“...Don’t you think, then, that it was the empire that burned the farming villages near E-Rantel? It seems like you thought it was the Theocracy, Captain. And the one who rescued you was Gown, right? Couldn’t he have been in cahoots with the empire? As someone suggested before, perhaps he was meant to be a spy all along? You didn’t see the corpses of the ones who had cornered you, correct?”

The powerful members of the six scriptures flashed through Gazef’s mind. At the same time, he saw Ainz Ooal Gown.

“...Regarding the corpses, it’s as you say, Count Litton, but I don’t think there’s any conspiracy. The ones who attacked when I was in Carne were stronger than imperial knights could be. They were giving

orders to angels, so I have no doubt they were from the Slane Theocracy.”

“Why would the Theocracy do such a thing?”

How should I know?

It would have been such a relief to be able to answer.

As Gazef struggled to come up with a reply, help came from someone next to Count Litton.

“Who cares about the crazy caster? Don’t we need to figure out how to reply to the false emperor’s declaration, Your Majesty?”

“Marquis Beauleurope is right. What we need to decide is the kingdom’s response.”

“Permission to speak, please.” Marquis Pespea stepped forward slightly. “It’s impossible to accept the emperor’s declaration. It seems war is our only choice.”

The nobles became enthusiastic.

“Ooh, so we’ll drive them off, and then it’ll be our turn to march into *their* country!”

“Exactly. I’m sick of doing nothing but repelling the empire’s advances.”

“There can be no doubt. You’re quite right, Marquis.”

Their voices mixed with laughter. Everything they said was true, but it was also what they always said.

For the past several years, there had been a regularly occurring war with the empire on the Katze Plain.

In the end, the same scuffle, which always ended with the two countries merely glaring at each other or the kingdom taking a little damage, would happen as usual. That was the sort of relaxed idea that circulated among the nobles—they were used to the fighting.

But—Gazef’s warrior instinct screamed that he should speak.

“Don’t assume that this war will stop at a dustup like before!”

The nobles looked accusingly at him, as if he’d ruined their fun.

“I see. So that’s what my captain of the Royal Select thinks. Please explain why.”

“Yes, Your Majesty. It’s...” Gazef’s alarm bells were ringing because of a certain person. “It’s because of the caster, Ainz Ooal Gown.”

“Ah. And you’re the only one of us who has stood face-to-face with him, so I imagine we should give your opinion some weight. But what basis do you have for thinking that?”

Gazef was lost for words. He didn’t have a good answer. It was simply...what his warrior intuition was telling him—that making a poor judgment about this war was dangerous.

“My king... Couldn’t we give E-Rantel to the empire—no, to the caster?”

After a moment of silence, the insults started flying.

“Are you a coward?! For shame!”

It was the king’s faction shouting him down.

“You’re so indebted to His Royal Majesty, yet you would surrender his territory? Since when is that imitation emperor your master?! What’s more, you haven’t even answered His Majesty’s question!”

Of course, Gazef could say nothing in response to those jeers; he would have thought the same were their positions reversed.

“That’s enough.”

It was the king who gave him a hand.

“But Your Majesty!”

“You’re angry for my sake, and for that I’m grateful. But I would like you to remember that our captain is not the sort of man who would betray me. He has thrown himself into danger for me many times before. I can’t believe he would propose something that would work to my disadvantage.”

The nobles who had shouted at Gazef bowed their heads to the king. Then the king continued, addressing Gazef.

“Captain, you’re my right-hand man, and I trust you. But I can’t do that, even if it’s your suggestion. Handing over territory without a fight isn’t something a ruler can do. Besides, it would be unforgivable to do that to the people who live in the area. It would break the people’s peace.”

Getting all the people out of the territory would be a nightmare. Even if it were possible, they wouldn’t be able to provide them the same standard of living they enjoyed before. The end result would be forcing them to live in harsh conditions.

“You’re right, Your Majesty. Please forgive me for that foolish remark.”

Gazef bowed his head. A foolish noble—someone who treated the people of the land only as tools to produce wealth—would never have said something like that. It was precisely because the king had so much compassion that Gazef was devoted to him.

He recalled what he had said to his vice-captain six months ago when they went to Carne.

Didn’t you ever hope? Hope that a noble would appear in your hour of need? That someone with power would come and save you?

Let’s show ’em that there are people out there who will risk their lives despite the danger, that there are strong who will protect the weak!

The Gazef who participated in the royal tournament wouldn’t have been able to say that. Back then, he agreed with his vice-captain’s view: There weren’t any nobles who would put their lives on the line for peasants.

But then Gazef began serving the king up close, and for the first time, he saw that there were nobles like that. The only problem was they were powerless.

Sadly, many lives had slipped through his fingers. And there were many times that silly aristocratic pride had caused issues.

Still, the man he served never became rotten. The king constantly labored to build a country that made life easier for the people.

Gazef was proud of King Ramposa III. If he wasn't, perhaps he would have taken up Jircniv's offer that time and switched sides on the battlefield.

That's how he felt, but dark clouds massed in his mind.

The king's statement was true and just—that wasn't the issue. The king had always been the kind of compassionate person who treated his subjects as people. But Gazef knew there was another reason the king was using such powerful words.

After the demon disturbance, the power balance between the factions had shifted greatly.

The kingdom was split into two factions in a power struggle: the king's faction and the nobles' faction. They had long been neck and neck, but now the king's faction had expanded, and the nobles' faction had shrunk.

Since the king led the way in driving off Jaldabaoth, he'd given the impression that he was a strong ruler, and many nobles switched sides and began supporting him. He couldn't very well show weakness now. Because...

"But I don't think the captain is wrong, per se—after all, we can avoid a war by simply turning over a single city. Preemptively shielding his subjects from suffering is also a king's job. Wouldn't a true king tear himself apart before bringing his subjects sorrow?"

The one commenting belonged to the nobles' faction. There were a lot of high-minded ideas bandied about, but most likely he was interested only in chipping away at the king's domain. Someone from the king's faction immediately retorted.

"That land is controlled directly by the king! If you want to give land to the enemy, give your own!"

That sparked its own reaction.

"What are you talking about?! The empire is demanding the area around E-Rantel. What would we achieve by giving away my land way off in some other direction?! Think for a moment before you speak!"

As a result of the king's faction growing more powerful, the nobles' faction had grown weaker. In order to remedy that, their attempts to hinder the king had increased.

That was the cause of another one of Gazef's anxieties. Because the balance between the factions had shifted, the efforts to chip away

at the king's power had grown. The kingdom was liable to break apart in conflict.

And that's why the king was appealing to his strength—to not allow his opposition any chance to revolt. There was nothing wrong with that, but...

...wasn't it incredibly dangerous for anyone who wasn't allowed to show any weakness?

Gazef was lost in thought until he was brought back to his senses by the intense gazes from some nobles in the king's faction. Their eyes questioned whether he might have defected to the nobles' faction, since he had proposed giving away the king's land. They stared with disapproval: *Have you forgotten all that you owe the king, commoner?!*

"Hmph! All you need to do is ask the king to swap the E-Rantel area for your land. Then you could give it away!"

"Do you think it's so easy to trade land? Fool!"

"You're the fool!"

The childish squabble immediately drew the whole meeting into a clamor. In the past, any debate would have ended in a draw. But the king's faction's voices grew louder, and the nobles' faction's voices grew fainter.

Before, the king might have stopped this himself, but it didn't seem like he was going to this time—because the king's faction's voices were louder, of course.

Anyone would find it hard to call a halt to a situation where they stood to gain. Plus, there was also the matter of the pent-up discontent.

Seems like he's being fed sweet poison.

Gazef sensed the cold, dark will harbored in the eyes of the nobles' faction members, and it sent a chill up his spine.

This was all because of Jaldabaoth's attack.

Under the circumstances, having the king lead the charge was the best possible move at the time. If it weren't for that, the line would have collapsed, and the adventurers would have been wiped out. They would have lost the Blue Roses, leaving the kingdom in the direst of straits.

But looking at the current situation, Gazef had to wonder if there had been a better option they could have chosen.

How would this court meeting have gone if the factions had been on equal footing?

I don't know. But what'll happen if we lose the battle with the empire? Will someone argue we should resist to the end? Or maybe they won't? It's possible the king's faction will abruptly lose power, while the nobles' faction

will gain, but does that mean the balance will be restored? Or will it collapse...? Will a war that rips the kingdom in two break out...? Are we going to be all right?

He had the awful feeling that they were being manipulated. Even though it seemed as though they were making their own decisions, maybe they were being strung along somehow.

Could Sir Gown have planned all this...from the very first time I met him? No, I'd like to think that can't be true. We only talked briefly, but I didn't get that feeling from him.

Though the caster Ainz Ooal Gown had become his enemy, Gazef didn't have a bad enough impression of him to address him without the "sir."

He might actually be a peaceful ruler— Oh, ack. I can't be thinking disloyal things like that.

"Can we bring the shouting match to an end about now?"

The nobles knew who the gloomy male voice belonged to, so they quieted down.

That should have been the king's job. That someone else should stop them made Gazef bite his lip.

That victory was so sweet.

He thought it would be all right. But would the king forget that sweet nectar? Would the king Gazef was so proud of fade away? He couldn't completely clear the worries from his mind.

"Your Majesty, if we're certain the empire will invade, we need to prepare ourselves."

"Marquis Raeven, His Majesty can go along—"

But Raeven interrupted the nobles' faction member and spoke again. "Hold on. If His Majesty's army was defeated, how far do you think the empire would advance? In order to protect my own domain, I'll be lending all my strength to the king."

Silence descended.

The kingdom's soldiers were conscripted civilians; the gap between them and the professional knights of the empire couldn't even be measured. The only way to win against the empire's quality military was to overwhelm it with quantity. That's how they had fought for the past several years. If they lost even when they committed large numbers of soldiers, it went without saying what would happen.

Prompted by Marquis Raeven's remarks, the nobles' faction members must have imagined imperial knights invading their territory.

The first to declare their support were the ones who had domains between the capital and E-Rantel. Then those who were close to them. Soon, all of them had agreed.

“All right. Then I’ll make sure our response to the empire doesn’t arrive too soon, so until our declaration of war is delivered, gather your men! I’m sure the fight will take place in the usual location. Gather there. Naturally, I’ll go, too,” said the king.

“I’ll accompany you to the battlefield, Father!”

The one who spoke was Prince Barbro, who had been standing by silently up until that very moment.

“...No, no. The first in line for the throne doesn’t need to be there. I’ll go.”

It was the second prince, Zanac, across from Barbro, who answered. Barbro’s response was crystal clear.

“We don’t need you!”

It was a harshly hostile tone.

Zanac’s suggestion wasn’t wrong. It was awfully dangerous for both the king and his eldest son to go to battle. Surely even Barbro understood that. But the reason he refused was because he saw his brother as an enemy.

That was also due to the demon disturbance.

During the demon disturbance, Zanac had patrolled the capital and was praised by many of the kingdom’s people. Meanwhile, Barbro never left the palace. Consequently, the number of nobles supporting Zanac sharply increased.

Zanac wasn’t terribly good-looking, so the gap between his appearance and his courage made him stand out. And conversely, Barbro, with his splendid appearance, was presumed to be a coward. To erase that harmful rumor, Barbro wanted to stand on the battlefield and demonstrate to the court his bravery.

As his physique would indicate, Barbro was a decently capable warrior. That being said, he was ultimately counted among those who needed to be defended; he wouldn’t have had a chance at defeating Princess Renner’s attendant, Climb, who trained till he was practically coughing up blood. But he was still the best swordsman in the royal family. If Zanac swung a sword, his body would be pulled around by the weight of it alone. Barbro refused to be seen as less courageous than such a weakling. Marquis Raeven once said, *What’s the point of members of the royal family being skilled with a sword?* but Barbro knew that he wasn’t as smart as Zanac, so he wanted to avoid losing in the area he could be proud of: his abilities.

More than anything, he didn’t want to fall behind in the contest for the throne.

Gazef’s stomach pained him when he thought about the dangers lurking within the kingdom.

He was thinking that if the king retired, he would follow him and live as his personal guard, but that could be tricky.

Was it wrong, as the king's loyal retainer, to not save the lives he could if he continued working as the captain of the Royal Select? He also wondered if the king would even allow him to follow in his footsteps.

He could leave the position up to someone else, if there were someone as strong as him around, but he couldn't think of anyone. In terms of power, there was one person, but he didn't think that man would agree to succeed him.

I wonder what Brain will do now. What's on his mind these days?

Brain was currently serving Princess Renner directly, but Gazef had the feeling he might suddenly go off somewhere. If he disappeared, it would surely be to improve his swordsmanship. It was a lifestyle that appealed to Gazef somewhat, as someone whose duties required him to stay in the palace.

He recalled how sharp Brain's sword was.

They had sparred after the demon disturbance.

Both gave their all in the bout, but it ended with Gazef's victory. Still, every time his hair fluttered in the gust of a sword slash, he keenly sensed the long hours of training Brain had put in.

He even had the feeling that in a few years Brain would surpass him.

If he succeeded me as captain of the Royal Select, I could focus on training the younger generation... Then the kingdom would have a chance at producing some outstanding warriors.

"I agree!"

Marquis Beauleurope's voice brought him back. Now wasn't the time to be mulling over the distant future.

"With your permission, I would offer you some of my strongest soldiers; they can double as guards. What do you say, my king?"

"Hmm, Captain, what do you think?"

Gazef couldn't very well announce that he hadn't been paying attention, so he pretended to think for a moment. He purposely ignored Marquis Raeven's raised eyebrow.

It seemed Marquis Beauleurope was suggesting that Prince Barbro, whom he supported as the next king, go to battle. But he didn't know for sure, so there was only one thing he could say.

"As Your Majesty wishes."

The king nodded deeply, and Gazef felt somewhat guilty.

"Ah, I see... That's fine... Then you can come, too."

"Yes, Your Majesty! I'll cut off that fake emperor's head, Father, you'll see!"

Hearing Barbro's energetic response, Gazef prayed the busy days to come would send his worries out the window.

Marquis Raeven was one of the six great nobles and more adept than anyone when it came to politics. Some might assume the office where he shrewdly exercised his abilities would be gorgeous, but in reality, that wasn't the case. Most people would no doubt be surprised to learn that many of the decisions that plotted the course of the kingdom were made in such a cramped little room.

All the walls had bookshelves, lined with neatly organized books and labeled parchments—a testament to their owner's character. But that wasn't why the room appeared small. Well, it was certainly one reason, but...

The biggest factor was hidden from view.

Marquis Raeven's residence was built in brick with stucco coating, like most nobles' mansions. Then what was special about the office? It was like any other room in the building.

Except that it was surrounded by a layer of copper plate built into the walls to prevent eavesdropping, surveillance, or targeting.

The room had no windows, so it felt rather cramped, but in a cost-performance sense, it was big enough for his purposes, so he had to make do.

Having returned from the palace, Marquis Raeven went straight over to the only chair in the room, set behind his massive desk, then dropped roughly into it. It was the careless way someone who was utterly exhausted would sit.

Then he covered his face. No one who saw him would think he was the most powerful great noble. He looked much more like a tired middle-aged man.

When his blond bangs drooped slightly, he pushed them out of his face. Raeven leaned back in his chair and grimaced.

Perhaps because he had relaxed a bit, the stress that had built up during the court meeting came bubbling up as anger. It easily hit critical mass and became a roar that echoed into the void.

"They're all idiots!"

Not a single one of them understood the situation. Or if they did and they were allowing events to continue this way, that made them terrible conspirators.

The kingdom was actually quite cornered.

Due to the empire's frequent harassment, all sorts of dangers were gradually piling up, as exemplified by the looming food shortage.

The only reason the massive cracks weren't visible yet was because the nobles were convinced that they had to endure only until they drove away the other faction.

The empire could field professional warriors—knights—but the

kingdom had nothing like that. In order to resist the empire's invasion, they needed to round up ordinary folks and create an army of conscripts. Consequently, that left the villages shorthanded for a season.

The empire understood that, naturally bringing them to target the harvest season.

It went without saying what a problem it was to have male workhands absent from the fields during the busiest season. Some probably thought the answer was to simply stop recruiting so many commoners. But unless the kingdom gathered several times the numbers of the imperial knights, who were both disciplined combat professionals and well outfitted, their conscript army would be defeated all too easily.

Actually, there was one time the kingdom suffered greatly because it didn't draft enough men. At the time, Gazef led a successful counterattack that managed to take out two of the "previous" Four, so the fight ended with both sides hurt. Still, it could probably be counted as the kingdom's defeat, considering the resulting drop in its national power on top of all the lives lost.

And yet...

"That trash is betraying us! Those other idiots are consumed in a power struggle! And these morons are sowing discord!"

Marquis Blumrush, one of the six great nobles, was betraying the kingdom and selling intelligence to the empire. Nobles were fighting among themselves in the king's and nobles' factions. The princes were competing for succession.

Marquis Raeven let out all his resentment as he pounded his desk.

"And then there's the king! He's no fool, and I know he isn't acting in his own interests, but how thoughtless can he be?! If he doesn't turn over the throne soon, the fighting will only worsen! Princess Renner created this advantage for the king's faction, so he should have passed his authority to the next generation and been done with it!"

The one who suggested that the king should join the battle during the demon disturbance had been the Golden Princess, Renner.

As a result, the influence of the king's faction dramatically increased. If the king had abdicated in favor of Prince Zanac right then, it probably would have gone smoothly, but...

"This is all because he took pity on his eldest. I empathize, but what's important here? Isn't there anyone with a brain who can do a little thinking?"

Actually, those people existed, but most of them were already in Marquis Raeven's faction.

Instead of gathering all of them on his side, he wished he had

strategically placed them in the other faction to manipulate it from within. Not only did he regret his past self's mistake, he practically ripped his hair out at the fact that there didn't seem to be any smart nobles in the opposition.

"They're all so weak!" He howled, thinking of the nobles no more intelligent than goblins who could see only the food dangling in front of their eyes. "But—what should I do? Think!"

Breathing raggedly, he racked his brain.

He had to think of a way to keep the kingdom going despite the ordeals that were sure to continue.

"First, the upcoming war with the empire is a significant risk. Ainz Ooal Gown is said to be quite powerful. We should assume we'll take at least ten thousand losses and think about where to go from there. At the same time, we need to get the next king into power..."

He organized his thoughts by saying them aloud. Really, he would have liked to have someone to consult with. That was precisely why he was supporting Prince Zanac.

The second prince was Raeven's sole ally in the royal family—well, he had found another in Princess Renner. Their alliance worked because they understood the current dangers in the same way and plotted their course accordingly with an eye on the future.

If he could get Prince Zanac onto the throne, at the very least the weight on his right shoulder would be lifted.

"...He said he would make me his prime minister, and it probably wasn't a joke, so the weight on my left shoulder will probably stay the same. Even so, the kingdom's situation should improve."

Marquis Raeven's goal for the near future was to ensure Prince Zanac became king. If he failed, the kingdom would be one step closer to ruin.

"Now I have Princess Renner's help, so things should become slightly easier in the future..."

Muttering his ideas and strategies as he pondered, Marquis Raeven sighed deeply.

Sometimes he wanted to leave it all behind.

On more than one or two occasions, he entertained the idea of simply destroying everything out of frustration.

He was building a castle in the sand, but there were children running amok. Under those circumstances, destructive desires probably couldn't be helped. But there was a reason he was able to endure.

Knock, knock.

The sound came from lower on the door. For a moment, Marquis Raeven's face was completely out of character. It was almost like his expression had melted—the corners of his eyes lowered and his lips

relaxed.

“Oops, that won’t do. Can’t be looking like that.”

He forced himself to pull it together, smacked his cheeks lightly, and fixed his messy hair. Then he raised his voice so the person on the other side of the metallic door would be able to hear. He made sure his voice was gentle and not angry.

“Come in.”

The speed at which the heavy door opened indicated how much the person who pushed it had waited for that moment.

A child appeared.

The adorable, innocent boy’s cheeks stood out pretty and pink against his white skin. He was probably around five years old. He ran across the room to Marquis Raeven’s lap.

“It’s not very becoming to run indoors,” a woman’s voice called after him.

Her face was beautiful, but there was something melancholic about her. The most fitting word was perhaps *cheerless*. The quality of her clothing was good, but the dress was a somewhat somber color.

She bowed her head to Marquis Raeven and then smiled faintly.

When was it that my wife finally began to smile?

He suddenly recalled how things used to be.

When the marquis was younger, there was a time when he harbored the ambition that any talented youth would: acquiring the throne.

The irreverent dream of usurping the crown.

To a young marquis who was confident in his quick wits, that was what he considered the most appropriate life goal. He devoted himself to his ambitions. He expanded his influence, collected wealth, made connections, defeated his political rivals...

Taking a wife had been merely another means to an end. If being married would increase his standing, he didn’t care what sort of woman became his bride. In the end, it was a beautiful yet cheerless person who came to him, but he didn’t mind; the important thing was the connection to her parents.

Their life as a married couple was normal.

Rather, it was Marquis Raeven’s personal idea of normal. When he married her, he paid her the attention he would give any other tool, but there was no love at all.

Then something had changed him.

The marquis’s gaze shifted to the child at his knees.

When he had first heard they were having a baby, all he felt was that it would be but one more tool. But when the newborn squeezed his finger, something inside him broke.

The baby reminded him less of a squishy miniature human and

more of a monkey. Raeven never thought he was cute or anything like that. But when he felt that faint warmth through his finger, somehow everything else seemed absurd.

He suddenly felt like the throne was no better than garbage.

At some point, without his realizing it, the man who had once burned with ambition was dead.

He also recalled his wife's expression when he thanked her—he could never tell her, but it made him laugh whenever he remembered it. The thought, *Who are you?* had been plain on her face.

Of course, at first, she probably thought it was merely a temporary change because she had borne him an heir. But the difference in how he acted eventually became so strange that she began to wonder if the marquis had gone mad.

Apparently, given a choice between her husband up until that point and her changed husband, she preferred the latter. Her mood had begun to change as well. Essentially, they became a normal couple.

At the moment, his child was trying to scrabble up, so Marquis Raeven picked him up.

The boy laughed as the marquis brought him into his lap. He felt the high temperature particular to small children through his clothes. The moderate weight felt comfortable, and a peaceful satisfaction filled his heart.

Now Marquis Raeven had only one goal.

I want to pass on my domain in perfect condition. It was a typical goal of a noble father.

He gazed gently at his child in his lap and asked, “What’s a matter, Baby Lee? *Smooch, smooch!*” There were only two people in the world who had seen the great noble scrunch up his lips and say, “Smooch, smooch.”

One of them, the child, squealed in delight.

“Dear, using baby talk with children isn’t good for their language development.”

“Hmph! Nonsense. That’s only an unfounded rumor.”

Though that’s what he said, internally he knew he shouldn’t do anything that might harm his son’s education.

He was sure that since this was his child, the boy was bound to be gifted. Well, it was perfectly fine if his son wasn’t, but it was only natural for a parent to want to encourage their child’s strengths. At the same time, he certainly didn’t want to be a bad influence on his son. But the one thing he couldn’t give up was the loving nickname.

Avoiding his wife and her slightly troubled expression in his field of vision, Raeven addressed his son again. “C’mon, Baby Lee. Hmm? What’s wrong? Is there something you wanna tell Daddy?”

“Eh-heh-heh-heh. Umm...”

The child cupped his hands to his mouth as if he was sipping tea, intending to tell a secret. Seeing this adorable act, Marquis Raeven felt the corners of his mouth soften affectionately. Nobody would believe that this face belonged to the man known by many as a snake.

“What is it? Will you tell Daddy? Ohh, I wonder what it is.”

“So for dinner today...”

“Uh-huh?”

“...we’re having something you like!”

“Wowww! That makes Daddy soooo happy! ...What is it that we’re having tonight?”

“Gabura fish meunière,” his wife responded.

“I see. Oh, what’s da matter, Baby Lee?!” he asked in a hurry upon noticing the boy’s sulky face.

“I wanted to tell you!”

Marquis Raeven felt like he had been struck by lightning from behind.

“Oh nooo... Er, I see. Sorry, Baby Lee, that was all Daddy’s fault... Why did you tell me that?”

In response to his furrowed brow and question, his wife put a hand over her face—the gesture seemed to say, *What am I going to do with you?*

“Baby Lee, will you tell me, then?”

The pouting boy turned his head away. In response, Marquis Raeven put on a violently shocked face full of such despair it seemed like he might choose death.

“Sorry, Baby Lee. Daddy’s a dummy and already forgot. Could you tell me?”

From the way the boy was peeking at him, he could tell it would take only a little more coaxing.

“Can you tell Daddy? I might cry!”

“Okay, umm, it’s your favorite fish.”

“Oh! Daddy’s so happy!” He smothered his boy’s pink cheeks with kisses. It must have tickled, because the child giggled innocently.

“Oookay. Let’s go eat!”

“The meal has not been prepared yet.”

“Ah.” After all the buildup, it was a bit of a disappointment, and he looked discontent. It would be simple to tell the cook to hurry it up, but preparing a meal involved various steps and doing things in order with the correct pacing. The cook couldn’t make an excellent meal for him if he threw off that rhythm out of pure selfishness.

Dissatisfied though he was, he didn’t give any orders. He wanted to feed his son food at its best.

“All right, your father is busy working. Let’s be on our way.”

“Okay!”

Marquis Raeven couldn't hide how lonely he felt when the boy's energetic voice rang out.

“Oh-ho! Hold it right there. I finished my work already.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Don't worry. It's already done.”

“...Is that true? You're not just putting it off until tomorrow?”

“...”

Though his wife's eyes were icy, he didn't move to put the boy down. On the contrary, he squeezed his son tight. He felt the child's body heat—*so warm*.

“...I was getting bogged down anyway. There's nothing left that needs to be done today.”

It wasn't just an excuse. It was true he didn't have any pressing matters that needed attending.

Perhaps his wife sensed that. She nodded a few times.

“I see... It seems like things have been rough.”

“They are. I don't need any more manual laborers, just brains.”

“What about my younger brother?”

“He's quite the brilliant fellow, but he's busy taking care of your home estate, isn't he? I couldn't call him here and put him to work. Is there anyone else you can think of who could help out?”

He'd asked her this over and over, and the response was always the same: There weren't any nobles who could handle things with skill comparable to Raeven.

If there were, he wouldn't be struggling so much. His only other option was to comb through the people. If they had a national education program like the empire's, things may have been different, but without that, it was painstaking to search out hidden genius. All he could do was follow up on rumors of exceptionally bright individuals, then negotiate with the master of the domain they resided in.

How much time and effort would that take? As he was sitting there disappointed, his son in his lap piped up to say he had an idea.

“I know, Daddy! I'll help you with your work!”

“Wow! Thanks, Baby Lee! Ahh, I love you so much!”

The cute remark brought another flurry of kisses to the boy's cheeks. This time was sheer bliss for the marquis.

These moments allowed him to relax and forget the demands of his day-to-day tasks.

He wouldn't hesitate to give his life to protect it.

Two months after the empire's declaration, it was the season of white breaths.

In villages around the kingdom, the people had transitioned from outdoor to indoor work, and there weren't many out and about. Not many of them were busy during these months. That was true for adventurers as well, even if it seemed like they worked year-round without taking time off.

Occasionally a starving magical beast would appear in a village or a sudden job would come in, but in general, there were not many requests. Searching for uncharted ruins or exploring secluded regions was too dangerous at this time of year, too. That made it the adventurers' off-season. They put their efforts into training, leisure, or side jobs.

But in Fortress City E-Rantel, things were different. It was filled with a heated confusion.

That said, it wasn't occupied by the same hustle and bustle as other cities in the kingdom. The excitement was born not of liveliness but a different emotion.

The source was the outermost of E-Rantel's three walls.

Countless people had gathered there. Most of them didn't look very impressive. The majority were probably commoners. But their numbers were astounding. There had to be two hundred and fifty thousand people.

It wasn't as if E-Rantel always had that many residents.

Certainly, as a city that stood on land where three countries met, there was a lot of traffic: Goods, people, money, and all variety of other things were coming and going. A city like that inevitably grew.

Even so, two hundred and fifty thousand in a single district was unrealistic.

Why were so many people gathering there?

Watching some of the young people provided a simple explanation.

Many of them were training with bladeless spears. Outfitted with dented steel armor and shields, they practiced thrusting into wooden and straw targets.

They were training for war. Yes, the people gathered there—two hundred and fifty thousand of the kingdom's subjects—were conscripts for the war against the empire.

Energetic cries overlapped in the air. Of course, there weren't many who shouted eagerly. Most were frightened of the upcoming

deadly battle and felt compelled to train by the knowledge that they wouldn't make it home alive if they didn't.

But not everyone was taking the exercises seriously.

War with the empire happened every year. That left many people feeling despondent. Lacking any motivation, one person was simply lying on the cobblestones in an inconspicuous corner. The gloomy man next to him was complaining. Another had curled up, hugging his knees.

There were more of that sort in the older age brackets.

These soldiers had no fighting spirit; their only wish was to make it home alive.

That was the reality of the kingdom's army. But what could be done? They had been ordered to come, robbed of their time, and forced to participate in a fight to the death that entailed very little reward. Even if they made it back alive, the instability in their basic lifestyle would continue to grow due to the time they lost—it was like a rope tightening around their necks.

Surviving meant only that they were destined for a slower death.

A wagon drove past the soldiers. The cargo bed bulged with a huge amount of foodstuffs.

Common sense would say accommodating 3 percent of the kingdom's entire population in one city and supplying them was practically impossible, but E-Rantel was the forward-most base in the fight against the empire and the place where the kingdom's troops were being mustered.

The conflict with the empire had been repeated so many times that making preparations for two hundred and fifty thousand people had become laughably routine. The food storehouse was massive. It was probably the largest building in the city.

There was a constant stream of supplies being carted out.

The lethargic people eyed the wagon with fear, as if they were watching a god of death drift past.

That was the mood that possessed those who knew what was about to happen.

Transporting so much food could mean only one thing.

War with the empire was near.

•

E-Rantel, within the innermost wall...

The mansion of Mayor Panasolei Grouzé Day Rettenmaier stood in a central location. It was a splendid residence, worthy of someone with the mayor's status, but it was several grades inferior when compared to the building next door.

That was the city's magnificent, honored guesthouse. It was opened only when the king or an equally important personage visited.

Currently occupying one of the rooms within was a group of men made up chiefly of Ramposa III and the great nobles.

Gazef stood silently next to the king, who sat on a simple throne.

In the center of the room was a large desk around which mainly nobles gathered, frowning at a large map that had been laid out. On top of the map were several markers, as well as countless scattered papers—the list of commanders, reports from reconnaissance units, records of previous battles, information about monsters that appeared in the area, and more. Almost no water was left in the jug the server standing by in the back of the room held.

That was an indication of how heated the debate had gotten.

In fact, the great nobles' faces, which were dignified and shaped by history, seemed deeply fatigued. The bigger the army became, the more meetings—and a greater variety of them—were required. Basic things could be delegated to the staff serving under them, but for matters the nobles had to arrange themselves, the leaders needed to have detailed discussions.

Their honor was on the line; they couldn't bear to bring shame upon themselves, so there had been a considerable amount of work to do.

But that was finally over.

The one who showed the least fatigue of all present, Marquis Raeven, spoke.

Rather, he was always the one speaking out front. They may have called him a bat that flitted from one side to the other, but no one doubted his intelligence. These bipartisan meetings always went the most smoothly when he presided over them.

"I know you've all been busy, so thank you for coming. With this, our current round of preparations has been completed on time. Now, let's make our plans for this war with the empire."

Marquis Raeven looked around at everyone and held up a piece of parchment so they could all see it.

"Several days ago, we received this declaration from the empire. It states the location for the battle."

Specifying a location for battles was something opposing groups from the same race sometimes agreed to, since sites of battles had the potential to end up as cursed ground where undead would spawn. When both armies agreed, the contest for superiority would be held in a place neither country found problematic.

Of course, it was true not all wars went that way—on the contrary, those sorts of arrangements were rarer than not—but the kingdom and the empire had been agreeing on the site of their battles

for several years.

It was the result of both countries seeing eye to eye on a common issue. Unless they coordinated, any new territory they fought at and won could have undead spawning nearby, which was a serious issue. Even if they somehow managed to defend against the undead, the land itself could be cursed, making the whole endeavor pointless.

Relieved sighs could be heard around the room upon Marquis Raeven's announcement—they could now treat the coming war as an extension of the past wars, since the same procedures were being followed.

“So the battlefield is—”

“Oh, don't make a fuss about it, Marquis Raeven. It's the same place as every year, isn't it? Where else could it even be?”

“Yes, Marquis Beaulieu. As you say, it's the same place as previous years. The foggy, cursed land of the Katze Plain—the northwestern part.”

“...Since they chose the same place as usual, do you think their plan of attack will be the same as well?”

Some were probably thinking that these arrangements were proof that despite the declaration about the caster Ainz Ooal Gown's country, the empire's real motive behind that nonsense was to simply create a *casus belli*.

If that was all, Gazef might have agreed. But Marquis Raeven shook his head.

“Sorry, Marquis Blumrush. Things likely aren't that simple. We've received reports that the empire has mobilized quite a large number of soldiers. I had my former orichalcum-ranked adventurer team investigate, and while they weren't sure about the exact numbers of soldiers, they counted coats of arms for six corps.”

“Six?!”

The room was overcome with exclamations.

The imperial knights had a total of eight corps, and the most that had ever participated in previous wars was four. But this time they would be deploying one and a half times that amount.

“Are they...serious?” one noble asked with an anxious look on his face.

Six corps meant sixty thousand men. The kingdom had two hundred and fifty thousand, giving them the overwhelming numerical advantage. In terms of individual fighting power, however, the kingdom couldn't hold a candle to the empire.

“I don't know, but we should probably consider it something different from the simple single clashes of past years.”

Up until now, the war generally consisted of two hundred thousand against forty thousand. The empire would charge, and the

kingdom would react. That was it. The empire's goal was to slowly exhaust the kingdom in the long term, and forcing them to exhaust their provisions was one part of that.

If that was their aim this time as well, they wouldn't have needed to mobilize sixty thousand. In other words, they had some other objective. It would be a mistake to treat this the same as their past fights. That was how Marquis Raeven saw it.

"It was a good idea to increase our numbers this time."

Unfortunately, the increased manpower also created the headache of increased war expenses.

In past years, the empire had timed their attack to coincide with the harvest season, but this year it was winter, so there were additional costs involved, such as procuring firewood.

The king was supposed to cover those costs, so if the king's faction hadn't gained more influence recently, they wouldn't have been able to gather enough contributions, and his power would have dropped significantly.

"But, Marquis Raeven, don't you think they could just be mobilizing more soldiers than usual to maintain face in front of their ally, that caster who calls himself a king? The empire took the lead in declaring war on us. If they didn't mobilize a large army and actually fight us, it wouldn't be good for appearances."

"I think there's certainly a chance that is the case. Also, we haven't received any word from Ainz Ooal Gown. It's possible that this is entirely the empire's initiative and Ainz Ooal Gown has gotten involved somehow. It could even be against his will."

If that was the case, Gazef would be extremely happy, personally speaking. What a relief it would be to not have that great caster as an enemy. But that line of thinking was too optimistic.

Gazef had kept his mouth shut until this point, but now he spoke. "May I say something?"

"Go ahead."

Having received the king's permission, Gazef stated the worry on his mind.

"I don't think that theory is very likely. Given the letter we received from the Slane Theocracy, I just can't imagine this being a superficial political move."

All the nobles looked annoyed.

The area around E-Rantel was of interest to three countries, so whenever the empire and the kingdom had their scuffle, the Theocracy would declare war as well. The notices they sent always claimed that the E-Rantel area formerly belonged to the Theocracy and that the kingdom was unjustly occupying it. Every year, the Theocracy demanded the kingdom return the land to its rightful

owner and said it was a shame the empire and the kingdom were up in arms over a right that wasn't even theirs to fight over.

Both countries wanted to tell the Theocracy to stay out of it, but since the Theocracy had never actually mobilized any forces, they interpreted those letters as nothing but talk.

But the latest one was quite different.

The Theocracy has no records on these matters, so it is difficult to determine, but if Ainz Ooal Gown truly once ruled those lands, then we recognize the validity of his claims. That was the content of the letter that had been delivered to the kingdom.

To the nobles, it was a preposterous, infuriating statement that deserved a curt response of, *Don't butt in and spout this irresponsible nonsense.* But of course, some of them grasped the real meaning contained within the message. They understood well enough.

The Slane Theocracy's statement implied their diplomatic position: *We have no intention of antagonizing Ainz Ooal Gown.*

That meant one of the three most powerful countries in the region was concerned about taking on a single caster.

Well, that made sense. Gazef continued his line of thought.

"A squad from the six scriptures was handily wiped out... I'm not saying Ainz Ooal Gown did it on his own, but the Slane Theocracy probably doesn't want to make an enemy of someone who wields that much power. If this conflict really is entirely the empire's ploy and Ainz Ooal Gown only happened to be involved, I don't think the Theocracy would make such a statement."

"Hmph. What can one caster do anyway? We number two hundred and fifty thousand."

Count Litton cracked a derisive smile and laughed at Gazef's caution.

Gazef kept himself from furrowing his brow. That caster was immensely powerful, and the role he could play was astoundingly major. But at the same time, he understood what Count Litton was saying.

If he didn't know better, he would have thought the same thing.

For example, the empire had Fluder Paradyne, a great caster whose name was known far and wide. He was said to be able to use fifth- or perhaps even sixth-tier magic, but no one knew the details.

That was because Fluder had never participated in battle against the kingdom, so his magic had never wreaked havoc on their army.

Furthermore, though everyone knew sixth tier was awesome, it was simply reality that they didn't grasp exactly what that meant.

That was true even for the captain of the Royal Select, who had been through a great many battles.

To someone who wasn't a caster but a noble who knew of magic

only academically, it must have been even harder to fathom. In fact, many kingdom nobles were of the opinion that Fluder wasn't such a big deal. They thought the empire hyped him up for appearances. The tendency to think that way was especially prevalent among higher-ranking nobles who didn't have much contact with adventurers or other occupations that used magic.

Count Litton must have been one of those. It was clear he considered casters a type of commonplace magician. Of course, the priests he ended up calling when he was sick or injured were somehow different.

"...I don't think we should feel safe in mere numbers. If this caster used a flying spell and an area-of-effect attack, we would be in deep trouble. It would also be a problem to be hit with long-range attack spells. But I doubt the empire would waste a specialist like that. It is treating him strangely, though. I don't think it would go to these lengths if he was a mere caster. We should be wary," Margrave Urovana murmured solemnly.

His hair was already completely white, and his face was covered in wrinkles, but it still definitely held the particular dignity of a person with many years of experience. His age was part of the reason, but each word he said carried a weight that Count Litton's had not, and even Litton himself had to nod in agreement, albeit reluctantly. But there was someone who had a rebuttal, and that was Marquis Beaulieu.

"Hmph. Who's Ainz Ooal Gown anyway? Like Litton said, what can he do on his own? If he comes flying through the sky, shoot him down with arrows. If he attacks at range, we'll do the same. What can one measly caster do?! Casters only change the course of an entire battle in stories!"

"...With all due respect, some of the bards' heroic sagas are true..."

"Apparently, you haven't heard, Captain, but flashy stories get people's attention. When bards are busy exaggerating, sooner or later, the story becomes something that is far from the truth. And stories are apt to change in major ways when passed from teller to teller besides."

"But if we prepared with a unit of casters who can cast Fireball—"

"Is it possible to round up a big group of people who can use Fireball, Captain?"

"I...doubt it."

Fireball was a tier-three spell. Even the empire, with its magic academy, would probably have difficulty gathering a large number of casters who could use that.

"Then isn't that your answer? Magic is just one weapon. No

matter how powerful he is, this caster won't be able to change the course of the battle on his own! You're a good example yourself, Str—Captain Stronoff. No one can defeat you in a duel, but neither can you make short work of an army tens of thousands strong."

What Marquis Beauleurope was saying was true. Gazef couldn't find anything to argue against.

Moreover, Gazef had heard doubtful tales of ten thousand soldiers getting killed with a single spell only in stories. Even the old woman Ligritte Belzú Kaurau, one of the Thirteen Heroes, didn't have that much power.

But Gazef was still worried.

Isn't he just speaking from ignorance if he doesn't actually know any amazing casters?

"...What about dragons?"

"Marquis Blumrush... The caster is a human, I presume? Why do you bring up dragons?"

"O-oh, I was just thinking, since one of them could take an entire human army..."

"There's no point in bringing up dragons when we're talking about humans. Your premise is wrong in the first place! What are you thinking? Being so frightened of a single caster"—Marquis Beauleurope glared in Gazef's direction—"jumping at his shadow? Shouldn't you be ashamed, as a noble of the kingdom?! Though...I do understand your worries, Captain... We should probably assume this Ainz Ooal Gown's individual fighting power is equal to five thousand men."

"F-five thousand?!" Count Litton's eyes grew large. "Five thousand in one... Isn't that a bit of an overestimation? Surely half that amount is fine."

"I'm assuming that the captain is equal to a thousand men. If the captain is on guard against this enemy, five times that amount makes sense...because I trust the captain's eye."

"Thank you."

I wonder if Ainz Ooal Gown's combat ability is really equal to only five thousand, but assessing it as anything higher seems unlikely. It's better to thank the man and keep him happy. With those thoughts, Gazef bowed to Beauleurope.

"Can I say something?" Prince Barbro, who had been silent up until now, spoke. "...There's something that has been on my mind for a while. Couldn't we send adventurers to war? They're working in the kingdom, so it should be a simple matter of drafting them as royal subjects. Why are we still not allowed to pull them into battle? There isn't any law against it."

The great nobles exchanged looks. As overseers of their domains,

they knew how valuable adventurers were. That's why they didn't think in the way Barbro did.

Gazef felt that the king was at fault for this remark. If he had given Barbro a domain and had him run it, this question would never have come up.

Marquis Raeven cleared his throat.

"Prince. First, aside from copper plates and whatnot, do you understand that adventurers are stronger than soldiers?"

"Yes, I know that. That's why they would be able to do such wonderful things for us if we drafted them. The empire's knights would probably be a piece of cake for them."

"Without a doubt, I'm sure. But if we did that, then our enemy—the empire, this time—would draft adventurers to fight back. When that happens, we wouldn't see adventurers clashing with adventurers but rather adventurers killing the weaker soldiers. If that happens, losses on both sides will increase. Many more of the weaker people will die. So we've decided that we won't borrow the adventurers' power; thus, we're avoiding military escalation. It's also forbidden in the Adventurers Guild rules."

For the same reason, they couldn't hire workers, either. Although in their cases, it was also a matter of them being more expensive than adventurers as well as untrustworthy.

"Ah. I don't like it, but I understand. Then what if the city gets attacked? If they still didn't help us, that would be unforgivable as people of our country, no?"

"I understand what you're saying, Your Highness. But it's hard to tell whether they consider themselves subjects of the kingdom or not. Many of them live as travelers. More than anything, if an adventurer dies in battle, that's a loss for the country and a greater loss the greater the adventurer. Specifically, those losses would increase the possibility that monsters appear, and we don't have the adventurers to deal with them. Hence, the separation between the military and adventurers."

"...Earlier, Marquis Raeven was saying he enlisted retired adventurers as soldiers, didn't he? Former orichalcum ranks or something. That's fine?"

"Apparently, that's not an issue. The Adventurers Guild has rules, but they don't apply to people who have left the guild. That's why he was able to hire them."

"...I don't know. I just don't like this."

Some of the nobles chuckled in agreement.

"But that goes through orichalcum rank. For adamantite, it might be different. Currently, in the kingdom, we have two adamantite-ranked teams, but..."

There was no one present who hadn't heard of the Blue Roses, who had taken action during the demon disturbance.

"...before their era in the spotlight, there was another adamantite team. They retired, but they don't appear to have been hired by anyone. Right, Captain?"

"That's right. There were four members. One runs a training hall to train select students in swordsmanship. Two went off traveling together. The last one is an old woman who at one point belonged to the Blue Roses but later disappeared."

Recalling each memorable character, Gazef counted them on his fingers.

He had been walking in the royal capital when his master, who had seen his fight in the royal tournament, dragged him to the training hall for a hell of forced study and sword technique drills.

It was because of that training that Gazef, who had been a simple mercenary, was able to better serve the king, but that said...

No, thinking back on it now, those are good memories.

"I see. I heard there's an adventurer team in the city called Raven Black. I thought perhaps their caster, Beautiful Princess Nabe, could face Ainz Ooal Gown, but I suppose it won't work out, then."

The idea itself was a good one, but the Adventurers Guild was sure to oppose it.

Several nobles began to disparage the guild:

They're nothing but commoners. Who do you think is hiring adventurers in the first place? If you're a loyal subject of the kingdom, it's only natural to cooperate. And so on.

To those at the top, anyone who didn't bow to authority was unpleasant. But it was also true that without adventurers, fighting off monsters would be practically impossible.

If the Adventurers Guild moved away, the kingdom would slowly fall into ruin, unable to exterminate the larger monsters that appeared. That was surely what would happen, even with Gazef around.

Monsters had a wide range of special abilities that required a wide range of attacks, defenses, and healing to exterminate. That was why adventurers were indispensable. Of course, it would have been a different story if, like in the empire, they had casters and rangers incorporated into their army.

"No, that's brilliant, Your Highness! Doesn't sound bad at all!"

It was some baron who had shouted.

His status was definitely not high enough to be in the room, so his presence meant he had to be someone's flunky.

"Beautiful Princess Nabe may have an insightful opinion as a caster. At the very least, perhaps we should send a messenger to talk

with her!”

Voices of agreement sounded, albeit sparsely. Most of them were lower-ranking barons. Since they were all supporting Prince Barbro, they must have been lackeys of one of the nobles’ faction members.

They didn’t seem to notice that anyone with a decent sense of tact wore a bitter expression.

“You should go, then.” The king sounded tired as he gave the order. “Sir Momon is an adamantite-plate adventurer, though. Don’t do anything to upset him.”

“Yes, Your Majesty! I, Nosmartz, shall carry out this royal order without fail!”

“All right, then. Do take care to respect Sir Momon,” the king repeated and then dismissed him with a wave of his hand. The noble who had received the order exited the room, brimming with confidence.

It seemed like he didn’t realize that he would be cast aside the instant any trouble occurred.

Marquis Raeven sighed. “Well, we got off topic... Where were we...? Oh, right. I believe we were talking about how much fighting power Ainz Ooal Gown has. I’d like our common understanding to be that he, on his own, is equivalent to five thousand soldiers, if there are no objections...?” He eyed Gazef.

“No, no objections.”

Gazef felt like double that still probably wasn’t enough, but he knew it would be a challenge to get anyone who hadn’t witnessed his power to believe that.

“All right. Then can everyone send their troops to the area of Katze Plain as specified by the empire?”

Each noble gave their assent as Raeven looked at them in turn. When he faced Marquis Beauleurope, the man answered loudly.

“Of course it’s no problem, Marquis Raeven! I can move my army at once. And Your Majesty, I have one proposal—if I may? There’s something I would like the prince to do for me.”

There was only one prince present. All eyes turned to Barbro.

“It’s said that the caster Ainz Ooal Gown showed up and saved Carne. If he was just playing at chivalry, that’s fine, but it’s also possible he was making some sort of strategic move. I think we should send an army and speak with the people there. I’d like the prince to command that endeavor.”

“Marquis!”

Barbro glared sharply at Marquis Beauleurope.

“Silence.” It was the king who spoke. “That’s not a bad idea. My son, I hereby order you: Go to Carne and speak with the people there.”

Gazef desperately worked to keep his eyebrows from moving.

He didn't think it would be possible to get information about the caster from Carne at this point. And wasn't it a bad idea to split up their forces, even slightly?

"...If it's an order, then I have no choice but to obey. But please know that it's not what I want to do."

Realizing the king had no intention of retracting his command, the prince bowed his head, though he didn't attempt to hide his displeasure.

"For the army that will go to the village, I'll lend you some of my elite troops. Please also allow me to gather some nobles to accompany Your Highness. I imagine five thousand is enough?"

"Aha, so you're wary of a detached imperial unit? You're always so perceptive, Marquis Beauleurope."

Gazef understood Marquis Raeven's comments, but he wondered if the empire would really pull such a stunt after specifying the location of the battle. In a normal war, that would be elementary strategy, but to send out a detachment after promising a definitive battle would simply earn contempt from neighboring countries. The empire would be hanging itself.

"I doubt it will require that many soldiers, but it's your proposal, Marquis. I'll leave the numbers up to you."

"I'm grateful, Your Majesty. There is one more thing..."

Marquis Beauleurope paused for a moment, less to take a breath than to make sure everyone was listening.

"Who will lead the army in this war? I have no problem taking command, if need be."

The atmosphere shifted.

That was a disquieting remark. He was asking the king a question, but the content of it was something else entirely. He was putting invisible pressure on the king to hand over command authority.

When asked whether King Ramposa III or Marquis Beauleurope would be the better commander, most of the nobles would choose Marquis Beauleurope. He was also responsible for raising a full fifth of the kingdom's army—fifty thousand men.

Additionally, he had an elite corps. It was a band of professional soldiers inspired by Gazef's Royal Select.

Their combat ability was high. They weren't as strong as Gazef's men, but they could still fight evenly or better against the empire's knights. What was particularly surprising was how many there were—some five thousand in total. If they fought the Royal Select, they would probably win a crushing victory with sheer numerical superiority.

If the king wasn't present, command would no doubt go to

Marquis Beauleurope. But the king was present. In which case, Ramposa III commanding was only natural, but the members of the nobles' faction probably wouldn't accept that readily.

Gazef's expression grew stern in response to Marquis Beauleurope's pressuring question, but although the marquis saw that, he didn't pay him any mind. To Marquis Beauleurope, Gazef was merely a peasant who could handle a sword. He couldn't even stand the fact that anyone who wasn't a noble was attending the meeting.

"...Marquis Raeven."

"Your Majesty!"

"I entrust you with command. March the army safely to the Katze Plain. I leave the formations and positioning after that up to you."

"Understood." Marquis Raeven accepted the royal order with a bow. Marquis Beauleurope's desired command had been swiped, but he couldn't complain if it was Marquis Raeven. Everyone knew how he excelled, so it was hard to criticize Raeven in a harsh way. More importantly, he had an incredible number of connections. Even some of the nobles under Marquis Beauleurope were indebted to him. Criticizing him in front of them could make them question Marquis Beauleurope's capabilities, so he had no choice but to agree.

"Marquis Raeven, I'll entrust my army to you as well. Let me know if you need anything."

"Thank you, Marquis Beauleurope. I will."

The king had managed the situation brilliantly. Gazef couldn't have been more satisfied if he had done it himself.

"Is there anything else?" He waited briefly for any answer, but no one responded. "...Then begin preparations for war. You'll be departing as early as tomorrow. It will probably take two days to reach the battlefield. Make sure to prepare carefully. You are dismissed. Marquis Raeven, the rest I leave to you."

"Understood, Your Majesty."

Everyone left the room in order to make their departure arrangements, and the only ones left were the king and Gazef.

Ramposa III slowly rolled his neck in a circle. Even Gazef could hear it cracking. It had to have been awfully stiff—the look on his face said it must have felt good to stretch.

"You must be tired, Your Majesty."

"Indeed I am."

Gazef winced. Miniature versions of the kingdom's two rivaling factions had been there moments ago. The fatigue the king felt had to be quite serious. But there were people who had suffered more than King Ramposa III.

"I think it's about time..."

As soon as Ramposa III spoke, there were several knocks at the

door. Then it slowly swung open and someone who had been waiting came inside. It was a man with a face that was not much to look at—the best description was probably *overweight bulldog*. His hair was thin enough that his head was reflecting the light, and the hairs that were there had turned white.

His body was round, with an overgenerous amount of fat around his abdomen and so much flesh gathered under his chin it left onlookers in disbelief.

No, he may not have been much to look at, but there was a gleam of wisdom in his eyes. Ramposa III greeted him with a deeply sympathetic smile.

“Thanks for coming, Panasolei.”

“Your Royal Majesty.” The mayor of E-Rantel gave his master a respectful bow. Then he shifted his gaze. “It’s been a while, Sir Stronoff.” Panasolei was a noble, but he was extremely polite to Gazef, a commoner, and paid him respect. It was precisely because he was that sort of man that he was dispatched to such a key location.

“Well, if it isn’t the mayor. Thank you again for your assistance that time. And thank you for helping treat my men’s wounds. I had to report back to the king as soon as possible, so I rushed off without offering a proper thank-you. My apologies for that.”

“No, no, please don’t trouble yourself. When you were attacked, I understood what a major incident it was, so I didn’t find it strange at all, nor could I have.”

They bowed repeatedly to each other, and the king’s cheerful laughter echoed out.

“Panasolei, not going to do that snorting thing this time?”

“Your Majesty... There’s no point in putting on that act with people who won’t underestimate me. Or do Your Majesty and Sir Stronoff think I’m the kind of man who actually does that sort of thing?”

“Sorry, sorry. I was only joking. Forgive me, Panasolei.”

“No, as your subject, I spoke too harshly. Please excuse my rudeness, Your Majesty. Now then...shall we begin?”

“No...” The king hesitated before responding. “No, there should be one more coming. Shouldn’t we wait for him?”

“Oh? Then should we get the matter of expenses for the city’s provisions out of the way? I can also explain the calculation of national strength a year out based on materials the marquis provided.”

“Yes, I’d like to get anything that will give me a headache out of the way first.”

The contents of Panasolei’s report made even Gazef, who knew very little about the internal affairs of the kingdom, frown in worry.

The piling costs were enough to make anyone anxious for the

future of the country. Scraping together the great number of necessary provisions had worsened the domestic food situation. Of special concern was the decline in national strength that would occur after demobilizing the conscripts.

Panasolei's estimate—though it was probably generous—was enough to give anyone a nervous tic.

The king was grimacing.

"What will we do...?"

"If...the same thing happens next year, and the empire attacks, the danger that the kingdom might collapse from internal strife will only grow. If the tax rate remains steady, we'll see commoners dying of starvation, but if we lower it, there won't be enough money to fund all our policies."

Ramposa III put a hand to his forehead and covered his face.

It was the result of dealing with the empire's harassment in a haphazard way for so many years. By the time they realized the empire's goal was to send the kingdom into a slow decline, it was too late.

"Your Majesty..."

"This is bad. If only I had acted sooner... I wish I could have handled it before the factions completely split in two. How stupid..."

"That's not true, Your Majesty. If you had tried to handle it then, a civil war might have split the kingdom in half, and in its weakened state, the empire could have swallowed everything."

Gazef could state it with certainty: King Ramposa III was doing a good job. The current state of things was due to the preceding royalty's lack of action. Years and years of grime were impossible to clear away in a single generation.

"I want to leave the kingdom to my heir in better condition than when I received it, even if only slightly..." the king said with emotion. His next words contained strength. "I guess now is my chance. Thanks to the demon disturbance, I have gained many supporters. Is this an opportunity to deal a serious blow to the empire and earn us some years of peace?"

Gazef saw a dangerous gleam in the king's eyes. He knew he should stop him. But the words wouldn't come.

If it was something about fulfilling the king's own ambitions, he could advise, but when it was for the stability of his family, the words couldn't get past his throat.

The man closest to the king and witnessing his suffering couldn't stop him from feeling that way.

"There's a possibility, but as you know, it's dangerous. If you act in a way that would grind down the nobles' power, the nation could be thrown into disorder."

The king furrowed his brow, which pained Gazef.

“You’re always right, Panasolei. Still, there’s always a chance surgery will kill you, but it might also keep you alive. If we do nothing, the disease will spread throughout the entire body, leading us to a death that is slow but certain. In that case, shouldn’t we take action?”

“What are you saying, Your Majesty? Surgery can’t be trusted. There must be a better method.”

“If there were magic that could save the kingdom, I would rely on that, but there isn’t. The only treatment option we have is the primitive folk practice of opening up the body and removing the site of the disease.”

Only the horrifically savage method said to be suggested by a minotaur sage could save the kingdom now. To think that their king felt so cornered that he would even say such a thing. A dismal silence fell upon the room.

It felt like the gloomy, oppressive atmosphere would never lift, but a knock echoed out, interrupting it.

Marquis Raeven entered without waiting for a reply.

“I apologize for keeping you waiting, everyone.”

Relief filled the room.

“Oh, you’re finally here. Marquis Raeven, I am sorry for taking up your time.”

For a moment, the marquis looked as if he didn’t know what matter the king was referring to, but then he realized and radiated an aura of exhaustion.

“Not at all, Your Majesty. You needn’t concern yourself. Handing Marquis Beauleurope command of the entire army would be the height of folly. The only commands he would give are ‘charge’ and ‘retreat.’”

That was an awful thing to say, but it wasn’t clear if Raeven had meant it or not. It was possible he sensed the woebegone mood of the room and was making a joke to lighten things up.

“And if Your Majesty had taken direct command, it might have resulted in the nobles’ faction retracting their support for the war. That left no one else suitable besides me. That said, I would like you to spare me a grueling, no-vacation workload, so I’m announcing ahead of time that after this war is over, I shall take the liberty of holing up in my domain for a few months. Now then”—his expression tensed—“my apologies, but I can’t stay very long, so let’s make short work of these issues.”

It was the usual cold, snakelike face, but Gazef could see human emotion, perhaps even something agreeable.

I was a fool for not being able to discern his true personality. If

someone told me I didn't have an eye for people, I'd have to agree.

Frustrated, he recalled the conversation that had taken place in the king's private chambers before he left the capital. There had been five people present: Ramposa III, himself, Princess Renner, plus Prince Zanak and Marquis Raeven. The astounding things he heard from those latter two shattered his rigid perception of the court. *Astounding* wasn't enough to describe the shock that the people he had so loathed were actually the ones doing the most to support the king.

"Whether for my children or you, I'm always causing trouble."

Turning to Marquis Raeven with a sincere expression, Ramposa III bowed deeply.

"Please don't, Your Majesty. For my part, I did many things without consulting you first. I regret not dealing with them sooner in a different way."

"Marquis Raeven, please allow me to apologize as well." Gazef bowed deeply. "Unaware of your true intentions, I was tricked by your conduct on the surface and harbored disrespectful feelings toward you. Please forgive me for being such a fool."

"Don't worry about it, Captain."

"Even so, if you don't punish me for my folly, this thorn will remain."

Marquis Raeven shook his head a few times in astonishment, then dealt out the punishment. "Understood... Then allow me to call you Sir Gazef from now on, because I've always respected you."

It was a punishment that wasn't a punishment.

Feeling even greater disbelief at how blind he had been, Gazef thanked the marquis from the bottom of his heart.

"My thanks, Marquis Raeven."

"It's nothing, Sir Gazef. Now then, let us begin. We need to decide what actions the kingdom will take next."

3

When Gazef went through the gate and arrived at the barracks in the outer circle, he took a deep breath and expelled his mental fatigue.

He was truly tired.

The times he truly felt like a commoner were during meetings like the one he had just left.

Serving next to the king and observing noble society, he had come to understand how they thought.

But there were often still certain ways of handling things or ideas

that popped up that only people born and raised as nobles could understand, and at those times, he had to wonder why they thought the way they did. He felt it especially whenever they prioritized their pride as nobles over concrete benefits.

No, what he understood even less was when they prioritized their own pride over their people.

Gazef looked around.

The soldiers rushing to and fro—they were the people. These were the subjects of the kingdom, all gathered from different villages for the coming battle. As soldiers, they looked so powerless. They should have been holding hoes and spades.

Wasn't it the job of those at the top to protect these people?

It was wrong to say they should give away E-Rantel. Like the king said, handing over E-Rantel would hurt the people living here.

But...

The image of Ainz Ooal Gown in his strange mask appeared in Gazef's mind.

When the caster returned to Carne with the first signs of night, he didn't look at all like he had just fought a fierce battle.

Yes, he and his partner had returned without a scratch from a clash with an opponent who had crushed Gazef and his men.

King of Darkness—they were appropriate words for a being so transcendent.

Compared to the folly of opposing that man head-on, he would rather... But that choice would hurt the people.

"Shit!" he snapped.

His thoughts wouldn't come together. He couldn't figure out what to do. Hesitation on the battlefield meant death. Even the man celebrated as the strongest of the countries in the region could die if his mind wasn't made up.

Especially if he was up against Ainz Ooal Gown.

Certainly, Gazef had never witnessed the fighting ability of the caster who saved the village. And even that man had said the enemies had fled, not that he had defeated them.

But everyone knew that was a lie.

"Come to think of it...why did he lie and say they ran away?"

After the pair had left, he had gone to see the meadow where the battle had taken place, but there was no sign of a massacre. He didn't find a single body. It took time to bury dozens of soldiers. The fact that there were no corpses—no physical evidence—lent credence to his claim that they fled.

But that held true only if Ainz Ooal Gown couldn't use magic. It was possible there were spells that would transport or erase the bodies.

And Gazef was confident in one thing.

It stemmed from his intuition as a warrior. When Ainz returned unscathed, Gazef had sensed the caster smelled faintly of death.

If it was true that they ran away, it was definitely because he had let them go.

But Gazef had more faith in his hunch than the caster's words. It was a groundless conviction—that the six scriptures members were dead and their corpses had simply not been left behind.

“...I don't know.”

There existed a caster who could annihilate an opponent who defeated Gazef.

How powerful would such a person have to be? At least several times as powerful as the band of warriors Gazef led.

What would happen if that person appeared on the battlefield and attacked them using magic?

Gazef looked once more at the people driven by excitement, fear, resignation, and panic.

The strength of the magic casters used depended on the skill of the caster, even if the spell was the same tier.

So what sort of disaster could Ainz Ooal Gown cause if he used so much as Fireball?

There were men here who had left their families behind: fathers with young children still drinking their mother's milk, sons who took care of their elderly parents, young men soon to be married. Was there even the slightest chance they could withstand such an attack?

That was impossible.

Life couldn't possibly persist after a strike from that great caster.

If a fire spell, then all that remained would be seared corpses; if a chill spell, then frozen corpses; if a lightning spell, then electrocuted corpses—that's how it would end up.

Would Gazef be able to withstand it?

He didn't think he would die in one hit.

But maybe that was naive.

“Ahh... How did this happen?”

Fighting with Ainz Ooal Gown was definitely a mistake.

Since he saved Carne, it seemed like Ainz Ooal Gown was a proper person who shed the same blood and tears. But Gazef had the feeling he was not just a simple, nice guy. The image that came to mind was a man who had no mercy for his enemies.

They should have avoided a fight and treated him with all the respect they could muster. Then perhaps they could have persuaded him to choose a different plot of land.

As Gazef looked gloomily at the people around him, a young man in white metal armor appeared in the corner of his field of vision.

Next to him was an aloof warrior. It was Climb and Brain.

Those two plus one more were having what seemed to be a fun conversation.

“Who’s that? I feel like I’ve seen him somewhere before... Ohh, it’s one of Marquis Raeven’s former orichalcum-plate adventurers.”

That team of former adventurers was a star of hope for the people, since all the members had come from a commoner background, so Gazef knew of them as well. In a way, they were like fellow ladder climbers who came before him.

Boris Axelson, forty-one years old, was a holy knight of the fire god and also held the class evil slayer, which excelled at slaying monsters.

Jorann Dicksgord, forty-six years old, was a wind god priest who could also fight as a warrior—a war priest.

Franzén, thirty-eight years old, was a warrior who could use four swords thanks to the magic item Dancing Weapons.

Lundqvist, forty-five years old, was a wizard said to be brilliant, who had spells he developed named after him.

And Lockmeier, forty years old, was a thief called “the Unseen.”

As Gazef counted the members on his fingers, he realized who was talking to Climb. Lockmeier. Come to think of it, he had heard that during the demon disturbance, Climb and Brain had teamed up with him and snuck deep into enemy territory to save people.

They didn’t seem to notice Gazef, and he didn’t want to interrupt.

Still, he felt it would be rude to not say hello. After all, soon they would all be going to battle. Though Gazef was the king’s aide and would therefore probably not be crossing swords with the enemy directly, no one ever knew for certain what might happen on the battlefield.

It might be our last time meeting in this world.

He wanted to talk to the pair if he could. As if the heavens had heard him, Lockmeier waved and left.

Brain and Climb remained, smiling as they chatted about something.

The bonds between the two of them appeared to have grown stronger during the demon incident in the capital. They had built a relationship that could have been classified as friends, master and apprentice, or colleagues, which was complicated but good.

Thanks to that connection, Brain was now one of Princess Renner’s soldiers, along with Climb.

It was true that Gazef felt it was both unfortunate and regrettable that a warrior equal to him, whom he had been hoping to recruit into the Royal Select, had been snatched away.

But seeing the pair like this, it was also true that things had

settled into their natural places.

Cracking a smile, he approached them with a quick step.

That armor sure does stand out, though. It's fine for when he's in the capital, but on the battlefield, it'll make him an easy target. Should I warn him?

There were a lot of soldiers around. None of them wore full plate armor, so Climb stuck out that way as well, but the bigger problem was the conspicuous pure-white color. Archers would be sure to aim for him first, and cavalry would probably also have a go. Between Climb and the empire's knights, Climb would probably win, but it was also possible that he would run into a knight more powerful than him. The Four were a good example of what he could be up against.

Apparently, that armor was a gift from Princess Renner, but she really has no idea what it's like on the battlefield if she picked a color like that.

Apparently, Princess Renner wasn't well versed in military strategy.

She would be upset if Climb died.

If he used Magic Dye, he could change the color temporarily, then revert it after he returned to the capital.

When Gazef approached the pair from behind with those thoughts in mind, Brain turned just his head around. His hand was reaching for the sword on his hip.

That's Brain for you. I'm impressed he could sense me from this far away.

Gazef's armor made a racket when he walked.

It wasn't strange for someone to react upon hearing that noise approaching.

But there were lots of people around busily preparing for battle. Picking out only the noises approaching them from the rest of that din was quite a feat. Well, it would have been different if he had been someone with special training, like a thief.

Brain's eyes widened. Then he glanced at Climb and grinned. It was a nasty grin.

He seemed to be misunderstanding something, but that was just fine.

Matching Brain's grin, Gazef closed in on Climb, who hadn't noticed him yet, careful not to make too much sound. He had no special training in walking silently, and he was wearing metal armor to boot, but Climb didn't seem to notice him at all and said something to Brain.

Gazef had successfully set up directly behind Climb.

Then he gave him a chop on his unprotected head.

"Whoa!"

Shrieking in a voice too hoarse for his age, he jumped back. The

eyes that looked at Gazef were gigantic.

“Ah! It’s Sir Stro—”

“Quiet down.” Seeing that Climb had swallowed his exclamation, Gazef repeated himself. “Be quiet. It’ll be a pain if people know I’m here. Just call me Gazef.”

He may have been the captain of the Royal Select and the strongest man in the kingdom, but most of the commoners here were peasants, so they didn’t recognize his face. They probably imagined him as a man six and a half feet tall with a gigantic sword and golden armor.

“D-do excuse me.”

“Nah, you haven’t done anything that needs an apology.” Gazef smiled wryly in response. Then it changed into a wince. “But if you don’t realize someone in metal armor is sneaking up behind you, you’re being too lax. I understand that it’s unlikely for an enemy to show up here, but still.”

“What are you saying, Gazef? It’s no problem to relax a bit. A taut string is liable to break.”

“You say that, Brain, but you noticed me from quite a distance.”

“Of course I did, with that weird presence you were radiating.”

Gazef realized Climb was looking at them in surprise.

“Climb. As someone guarding the princess, you really need detection skills. If you fail to discover an assassin lurking around, the one you’re meant to protect could be harmed.”

“Ohh, I see. I was wondering what you were up to, but now I get it. Hey, Climb, you’ve been training in your own way so far, right? Have you learned how to detect presences?”

“N-no. I’ve only trained techniques for battle. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not picking on you. I just wanted to check. Actually, I used to be the same way. When you train on your own, you end up forgetting to train your senses, but that’s really dangerous. How often do you think someone swings a sword at you from out front where you can see them?”

Gazef blushed a bit. He shot Brain a look that said, *You didn’t have to go into all that at this very moment.*

As the captain of the Royal Select, it was actually his job to train the young men working to become warriors, so he was awfully embarrassed that he hadn’t been able to do that.

Climb and Gazef were both commoners, so as servants of the royal family, neither of them could afford to slip up in front of the nobility. For example, if Gazef crushed Climb in a sparring match, the nobles would claim Climb was unfit to guard the princess. And if Gazef started to lose even a little bit of ground, the nobles would turn their personal attacks on him.

He wished he wouldn't be spoken of as a good person just because he did one little nice thing. He had cut off this young warrior, crowing that it was for the king's good.

No, I shouldn't be embarrassed. I should face up to my mistakes...

"Yeah, okay, don't rub it in. You demonstrated his weakness right before my eyes. I'll train him as best I can."

"I'm grateful, Sir Gazef."

"...C'mon, don't bow. You serve the royal family, so you're one of my men. But instead of training you personally, I've shoved you off onto someone else. That doesn't deserve a thank-you."

The more Gazef was thanked, the more guilty he felt.

"Man, having one foot in noble society makes everything hard in so many ways, huh? You get held back by stupid stuff; you can't do what you want."

"But you're in the same boat now that you're working with Climb to guard Princess Renner."

"I take it easy. I'll tell ya what I think about being her subordinate—er, no I won't; that would be bad, sorry. But I will say working for the princess is only temporary. If I get sick of it or have my fill, I'll leave." Brain smiled with a face like the autumn sky. The sopping wet man Gazef met in the capital was nowhere to be found.

He was a little jealous of him, that he could live freely like that.

"Sir Gazef, is it really all right for you to hang around chatting with us?"

"Well, I am busy, but I'd rather relax a bit... Speaking of which, are you two free now?"

Brain and Climb exchanged looks.

"More or less..."

"Hmm. Yes, there's nothing we need to be doing right now. All that's left is to equip ourselves for battle."

"Then how about we...? Hmm." He looked at one of the rampart towers. "Want to go over there?"

No one objected, so Gazef took the lead and headed over.

Since he was captain, the soldiers guarding the tower didn't stop him, and they arrived at his favorite place.

The tower stood along the outermost wall of E-Rantel, naturally making it the highest place in the city. It had a fantastic view reaching far into the distance.

In addition, the stagnant body heat didn't reach up that high, so the air was fresh, delivered by the bracing winter wind.

"Wow, what a view!" A boy's genuine wonder rang out. Climb's gaze fixed on the southeast.

"That's the Katze Plain, where the battle will take place, right?"

"Yeah, a foggy area where undead spawn—and, in a few days, a

battleground.” Gazef inhaled deeply and exhaled as he answered, hoping that by pulling a large amount of the refreshing air into his body, he could free himself from the various fears and worries eating at him, like his anxiety about Ainz Ooal Gown.

“This really is amazing. This alone makes it worth working for the princess. Casters who can use Fly must get to see this scenery all the time. I think I understand why so many of them are weirdos.”

“When you see the wider world, it must change your perspective.”

“Nah, that can’t be. Otherwise why not bring the nobles up here? You can shove the ones who don’t change over the side and kill two birds with one stone.”

Gazef smiled wryly at Brain’s joke. If this view alone would change them, he would drag them up in chains if need be.

Climb’s apparent confusion over how to react put Gazef in even better spirits.

“Ah, it was the right decision to come here with you two. It feels like poison is leaving my body.”

“Well, that’s good. So? Why’d you have us come up here, anyway? No one’s watching now. It can’t be that you just wanted us three guys to admire the view together, right? Is there someone you want us to kill?”

Brain’s bleak comment threw Gazef off.

“Well, I wouldn’t be able to guard the princess anymore, and I wouldn’t be able to train Climb, but...I owe you, Gazef. If it’s dirty work you need done, I’ll be happy to do it.”

He wasn’t joking. The only gleam in Brain’s eyes was one of sincerity.

“No, that’s not it, Brain. I don’t want you doing that sort of thing.”

“...My life isn’t as pure as you think, you know.”

“Probably not. Brain, you must have trained your sword in a tremendous amount of blood. But I’m the same.”

“But in your case, it’s the blood of your country’s enemies, right? For me, it was just the result of my own ambition. The blood may be the same, but we’re still completely different.”

“...Are you trying to atone for your crimes?”

“No, it’s not like that. I would have done anything in order to defeat you. I dedicated my life to it. Even after learning that the realm I can reach with my power alone amounts to nothing, I don’t feel guilty about anything I did. I just said I could do it because I owe you, that’s all. Don’t overthink it.”

“Then the answer is: I don’t want you to do that. And what do you owe me for? You mean when we met in the capital?”

Brain’s face soured. “Don’t worry about it. I just feel indebted to you, that’s all.”

“If you tell me not to worry about it, that just makes me want to know even more...” Sensing a powerful will to refuse, Gazef changed the subject. “Oh, and there’s no reason for bringing you two here.”

“Huh?”

Climb was the one who asked. Brain merely raised his eyebrows.

“...I just thought if you were free, it wouldn’t be bad for us three to have a talk, and the only place I could think of where we could relax and not worry about other people watching us was here. If we were in the capital, I know a quiet place where we could have had a drink, but...”

“What, so it was really just to chat? I thought for sure you had a secret mission for me.”

“No, no. Well, hmm...”

Just because they might lose their lives and never meet again didn’t mean he could say something that might only make them suffer later.

“Nah. Oh, Climb. That armor is a little too flashy. You might want to change the color. The way it is, you’ll make a good target for the enemy.”

“I can’t do that, Sir Stronoff,” Climb refused flatly. “This armor will be conspicuous wherever I go, so if I fulfill my duty while wearing it, my deeds will reflect well on Princess Renner. Besides, many nobles know that I wear white armor. If I dyed it another color out of fear, I’d be a laughingstock, and it would cause trouble for the princess. If that’s how it’ll be, I’d rather die a heroic death and enhance her reputation.”

Seeing his eyes, Gazef swallowed his replies.

Princess Renner doesn’t want you to die.

Don’t confuse recklessness for bravery.

Be patient now and become an even greater success later.

He could have given him any sort of advice along those lines.

But he figured nothing he could say would have the power to change Climb’s mind.

As Climb said, his white armor was the princess’s banner. His achievements would reflect well on her. Of course, the opposite was also true.

Climb was a warrior from an impoverished background. Renner had saved him, so he believed his life belonged to her. Gazef wouldn’t be able to budge that conviction—because he understood it to the extent that it was similar in some ways to his oath of loyalty to the king.

“I would give my life for Princess Renner,” the boy declared.

Gazef wasn’t sure what to say.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Why are you guys looking into each other’s

eyes like you're about to die? Relax, Gazef. I'll keep an eye on Climb. I won't let him do anything stupid, and I'll save him no matter what kind of crazy situation he gets into."

"Against the Four, I have no doubt you'll win, Brain... But if Sir Ainz Ooal Gown is on the battlefield, you'll die."

"...Is Ainz Ooal Gown really that strong? Ah, he's the one I heard about at your house, right?"

After the demon disturbance, the two had traded the stories of their lives since the royal tournament over drinks. It was then that he had told Brain about Ainz Ooal Gown.

"I can say with confidence that there isn't an imperial knight you can't beat. The ones called the Four are strong, but I still don't think they could defeat you. If you were lucky, you could probably escape from the empire's greatest caster, Fluder Paradyne. But if Ainz Ooal Gown stands in your way...I'm sorry, Brain, but that will be as far as your destiny takes you."

"Really? He's that strong?"

"...I'm certain of it. Brain, he's more powerful than what you're currently imagining. You should double or triple your estimate, at least."

"If he's that strong...then I wonder if he's a match for Sir Sebas."

"Sebas? The old man you told me about? The old man from your story was shockingly strong, but I think Sir Gown surpasses him."

"I would beg to differ. I can't really imagine he could be stronger than that man... But anyway, what's with the 'sir' you keep sticking on our enemy's name?"

"He's an opponent worthy of respect. But I don't want to cause trouble for the king, so I adjust depending on who I'm talking to."

Brain shrugged. "I gotta hand it to you, Captain—and you too, Climb. It seems like there are so many annoying details when it comes to swearing loyalty to the kingdom. I'm just kind of allowed to help out. That spacey princess is so generous."

It was a Brain-like thing to say. But his attitude toward the royal family was disrespectful.

The king's retainer Captain Gazef Stronoff frowned, but the warrior Gazef Stronoff grinned at the boldness of it.

If there were a lot of onlookers, he would have had to reprimand him, but because it was just the three of them, he figured there wouldn't be an issue if he was true to his warrior self.

"Well, it's true that Princess Renner might be a little too carefree. Well, I understand that you won't change the color of your armor, Climb, but in that case, be extra cautious."

"Thank you for your concern, but Princess Renner also told me to do my best with the color as it is, so I'm sorry, but I have no intention

of changing it.”

“I see. That’s fine, then.”

A cool breeze blew among them. The sky was so clear and blue it was hard to believe a war was about to start. Looking at Climb and his determined face against that backdrop, Gazef felt both joy and sadness at the fact that he had so many people he didn’t want to let die.

He changed the subject in a purposely light tone to clear the recurring emotions from his mind. “By the way, what were you two up to before?”

Climb and Brain exchanged looks, and Brain answered. “Yeah, you may be busy, but we have quite a bit of free time. I had him come with me on an errand. Earlier there was another guy—Lockmeier—he showed us the way. Our objective was the adamantite-plate adventurer who saved the capital. I heard he makes this place his home base, so we went to go visit him.”

“Oh, Sir Momon?”

“Yeah, yeah, him. We didn’t really get to talk at all that time in the capital. I wanted to understand the power of the warrior everyone says is the strongest and”—his mood changed to be more serious—“I wanted to ask him about something.”

“Ask him something?” Gazef repeated it back as a question.

Brain’s expression was impossible to describe. “Oh, you know, that vampire, Shalltear Bloodfallen.”

Shalltear Bloodfallen.

Though Brain Unglaus was equal to Gazef, that ultimate vampire had broken him.

He said that monster against whom humans couldn’t win had appeared in the capital as well.

Brain thought she must have had something to do with the demon Jaldabaoth.

“...I heard that Sir Momon destroyed the powerful vampire Honyopnyoko with an ultra-rare magic item or something. And that you can find the aftermath of a huge explosion in the forest. Apparently, the fighting was so intense that his armor was all beat-up when he came back.” That’s what Gazef had heard from the mayor.

“Yeah. I heard the same things. That’s why I wanted to talk to him. First of all, personally, I don’t think anyone, even an adamantite plate, can defeat Shalltear Bloodfallen. I don’t doubt his abilities, but I did want to ask if he really finished it off. And I’m curious about this Honyopnyoko, too.”

“So you mean there might have been another vampire, too?”

“That’s right, Climb. From what I’ve been able to gather, Sir Momon was chasing two vampires, so I wanted to see if it was Honyopnyoko and Shalltear.”

“So what did you find out?”

“Well, nothing.” Brain shrugged. “He wasn’t in. Apparently, he’s out of town on a job, and it’s unclear when he’ll be back.”

“That’s too bad. I guess my luck isn’t very good, either—like you, I didn’t really get to talk to him. I was thinking if he had time I’d like to talk. Or I’d at least like to thank him for saving the capital.”

“I see. Then, when this fight is over, want to go talk to him together? If we’re lucky, we’ll be able to meet him. How about you come, too, Climb?”

“I would be happy to accompany you!”

“Okay! Now I have something to look forward to after this war. He’s an adamantite-plate warrior. I’m sure we’ll learn something if we talk with him.”

“Right. He probably has lots of instructive stories. I’m looking forward to hearing what kinds of powerful enemies he’s fought.”

“That’s surprising. I didn’t know you like those kinds of stories, Gazef.”

“Yeah, as a warrior, they definitely interest me personally... Guess we’ll have to come back alive, huh?” Gazef looked toward the Katze Plain. “I know a pub in the capital that serves great food. When this war is over, want to go there to unwind? My treat. Times like this are one of the reasons to have savings, after all.”

“Hopefully, we’ll be celebrating a victory.”

Brain stood next to Gazef and gazed in the same direction.

“Uh, er, am I invited, too?”

“Can you drink, Climb?”

There were no rules about drinking in the kingdom, but no bartenders would serve teenagers.

“Well, I’ve never done it, so I don’t know.”

“Oh? Then you should try it. Eventually, you’ll end up doing some social drinking. Like we’re talking about.”

“Yeah. It might be good to get drunk once first so you understand how it feels.”

“Understood. Then please allow me to go with you.”

“All right! All three of us are going to meet up here safe and sound! Don’t go throwing your life away!” Gazef said, and Brain and Climb nodded in return.

4

Reddish-brown earth extended into the distance. A wasteland with

barely any green. It was bloodstained ground, whispered about by gossipmongers as a land of death.

The Katze Plain was crawling with undead and other monsters; it was known far and wide as a dangerous place.

Especially horrifying was the perpetual thin fog that was a constant whether night or day, gently concealing the creepers and crawlers. In fact, the fog itself gave off a slight undead reaction.

It was true the fog had never affected living creatures directly. It hadn't sucked away their life force or harmed them. But because the fog reacted to undead detection methods, the actual undead often stayed hidden, and many an adventurer had died in a surprise attack.

It wasn't foggy now. Visibility was clear for a long way, as if the plain were welcoming the new undead that would spawn as a result of the coming battle.

Similarly, there was no sign of any undead. Nothing moved—it was just a stretch of lifeless earth.

A collapsed spire and other centuries-old architecture stuck out of the ground like grave markers. Of course, none of the buildings retained their original shape.

Everything above the third floor of a six-story tower had crumbled, scattering rubble everywhere. Not even half the thick wall was left. Rather than weathering over time, the destruction was a product of the numerous battles that various monsters fought there.

That scene and the meadow were situated right next to each other; it was as though someone had drawn a line. That was one of the reasons people thought the plain was cursed.

In the sun's once-a-year compassion that had begun to shine down, a building stood majestically on the other side of the line—in the land of the living—looking out over the unhappy grounds.

Its construction had required countless large trees, of which there were none in the meadow. A sturdy peripheral wall denied entry. There was also a shallow yet effective moat with sharpened tree branches jutting out of it—a precaution against unintelligent undead.

Beyond the moat, innumerable flags fluttered. Most of them were the imperial flag, featuring the crest of the Baharuth Empire.

That was only natural, since this building was the empire's Katze Plain base.

This time the empire had mobilized sixty thousand knights. All of them were garrisoned at this base, a fact that made it unnecessary to waste words explaining how enormous the installation was. It was built with an appearance that made the words *sturdy fortress* seem most appropriate, on terrain that made it both easy to defend and difficult to attack.

Indeed, it had been erected in a hilly area. That's not to say the Katze Plain naturally had such topography, but rather it was the result of magic.

Of course, even for the empire, whose national strategy involved increasing the amount of mages available, this wasn't a feat that could be completed in a matter of weeks. The base had been constructed over several years.

Originally, it had been their plan to use the base as their staging point to attack E-Rantel. It was a giant fortress built with the possibility of siege warfare against hundreds of thousands of kingdom troops in mind.

The reason the kingdom hadn't done anything to interfere with the construction was simply that it didn't have the ability.

If the empire attacked, the kingdom would unite and protect its territory, but when it came to launching an invasion of its own, there was a lot of groundwork that needed to be laid down between factions. Another issue was who would get stuck with the financial burden of a war where there wasn't any territory to gain.

Ultimately, it came down to the fact that unless the sparks were coming down directly on them, people didn't feel like fighting against fires.

Above the enormous imperial fortress flew three hippogriffs. They slowly descended, tracing a large arc through the air. Any knight knew that this was the emperor's Imperial Air Guard's ceremonial descent pattern, which announced the arrival of an imperial messenger.

On the ground, ten knights stood by in a circle, holding imperial flags. It was a ritual to welcome a messenger from the empire. The hippogriffs swooped down into the circle. Their ability to land so close to the center showed how skillful the riders were.

Once they touched down, the messengers from the home country became visible—which was why even the honored knights who were allowed to participate in the ritual were so surprised that their flags wavered.

What threw them off was the appearance of one person who was very different from the accompanying pair. Since he didn't have his helmet on, his handsome features were clearly visible, which let everyone recognize him right away.

The blond hair rustling slightly in the breeze, eyes like the blue of the deep sea, tensed lips that conveyed his strong will—he had the expression a knight should.

More than anything, there wasn't a person alive who didn't recognize his full plate armor. It was made of precious adamantite and enchanted with powerful magic on top of that. Such items were rare

enough to count on one finger in the empire.

The owner of that armor was one of the most important knights in the country.

With a clear voice that matched his handsome looks, he called to one of the knights standing by. "I'd like to see the high commander of the Second Army, General Carvein. Where can I find him?"

"Sir! General Carvein is in a meeting in preparation for the battle with the kingdom that will commence a few days from now. We have orders to escort you to his tent, Sir Anoch."

"I see. And has...His Maje—has the King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown, arrived?"

"No, sir! The King of Darkness has not yet arrived!"

"Got it." Nimble sighed out of relief that they were properly informed and that the caster hadn't arrived before him. "Then can I have you bring me over? There's one other thing I'd also like to ask of you."

He carefully removed something from his breast pocket.

Nimble waited about an hour at the splendid tent before its occupant returned with a few escorts.

It was a man in the prime of life with all white hair and a quiet demeanor. He wore the same armor as the knights, but it didn't really suit him. He seemed more like a noble than a military man.

"Nimble, I thank you for coming." When he cracked a smile, the aristocratic impression grew stronger. His voice was soft, seemingly out of place in this fortress ripe with the odor of battle.

Nimble replied with an informal salute.

Natel Inyem Dale Carvein...

Once an obscure noble, his skill had been acknowledged and he was selected by the previous emperor to serve as general of the Second Army. He hardly had any military achievements to his name, but he was known as a reliable commander, and it was said that if he fought, he would never lose. Naturally, the Second Army had great morale.

And in each and every move his men made, it was apparent how much they respected him.

"I can't thank you enough for coming back here even though you're so busy as the high commander of the expedition."

The empire had eight armies, and each had a general as its senior officer. The general of the First Army was the great general who commanded all of them.

When there was no general of the First Army—no great general—the next lowest army number's general would assume the position. In this case, General Carvein was the senior officer.

“Now, now, Nimble. You don’t have to be so formal. You’re here on the emperor’s orders, right? It’s not as if you’re my subordinate. Treat me as an equal.”

“Still...” Nimble smiled awkwardly.

The one in charge of the military was the emperor, but the one below that was the great general.

The empire’s strongest knights, the Four, often carried out orders straight from the emperor, so in terms of authority, they were equal to generals. But in terms of age, experience, and sheer presence, Nimble couldn’t match Carvein, so it would be difficult to treat him as an equal when no one else was around.

Looking warmly at Nimble’s flustered expression, Carvein smiled.

“It doesn’t feel right for an old man like me to be treated with such reverence by one of the empire’s strongest knights, either. At least relax a little bit.”

“Understood, General.”

Carvein nodded as if to accept Nimble’s slightly less uptight attitude. “Ah, but it’s really good timing that you came today. It’s like the fog lifted to welcome you.”

“General Carvein, surely it’s not to welcome me but the tragedy that is about to befall the kingdom. How awful.”

“Tragedy, hmm...? So will you tell me, Nimble? What’s the aim of starting a war this big anyhow? Up until now, the point was to sap the kingdom. But this time is different. This time the end goal is to seize E-Rantel as a peace concession by winning on the battlefield.” Carvein’s eyes gleamed like blades.

“...The kingdom has mobilized many more soldiers than usual. Though our knights are far stronger than their peasant soldiers, their numbers are overwhelming and violent. If we really do clash, we can expect quite a few casualties. Even if we succeed in taking E-Rantel, won’t we just hand it right over to the King of Darkness? What in the world is His Imperial Majesty thinking?”

“First, we need to be alone.”

Carvein opened his mouth slightly and jerked his head. “Out, fellas.” His aides bowed and exited the room as indicated.

“I appreciate it.”

“Wasting time is for fools, right? So will you tell me?”

“Yes. The emperor actually sent me with instructions to tell each general about our war objective.” Nimble took a seat. “The war this time is for building friendly relations with the King of Darkness, King Ainz Ooal Gown. The method we’ve decided on is to take E-Rantel at the cost of bloodshed and then give it to him for nothing.”

“Losing the knights who keep order in the empire could endanger our nation, but it’s still worth the price to make the offering to the

King of Darkness?”

“Yes.”

Carvein crossed his arms and shut his eyes. But only for a moment. “Understood. If it’s the emperor’s idea, then I’ll go along.”

“Thank you.”

“No thanks are necessary... Let’s work to impress the King of Darkness.”

“About that—there’s a favor I’d like to ask you.” Nimble brought up the most important reason he had come. “First, we’re going to have the King of Darkness cast a spell. We’d like the knights to move after that.”

“What’s that for? Isn’t the point for us to shed buckets of blood to get him indebted to us?”

“There is that, but another one of our goals is to see what he can do. Apparently, the emperor has asked him to use the most powerful spell he can cast. We want to see how powerful it really is.”

“...So the King of Darkness...is a potential enemy?”

“It seems like you get the idea. King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown, is the empire’s enemy.”

“I see. Then once he looses his spell, knights will charge into the wound and tear it open even more. What level of magic will it be? I wonder. Something like Fireball?”

“We’re investigating because we don’t know, but it’s estimated that his attack magic is more powerful than Paradyne’s.”

Carvein’s eyes grew huge. But only for a moment.

“I see, I see. Well, I doubt he could possibly surpass that great caster, but if that’s how much power he has, then I can see why His Majesty would want to cultivate friendly relations with him at all costs.”

Nimble said nothing.

“If several hundred people died in a single attack, that would be quite a deep wound. That would be our chance to push into their territory. If he’s really that powerful, then perhaps we won’t lose as many knights.”

Nimble thought it would be great if that was how it worked out.

What he’d heard from his fellow knights in the Four, Lightning and Heavy Bomber, was that Ainz’s power was on another level and that he might be able to use a spell that could kill thousands at once, or tens of thousands if they were bunched up. It sounded unlikely, but if it were those two saying it, there was a high probability it was true.

Carvein was right that the deaths of the professional warriors who kept the peace in the empire would be a huge loss.

Nimble would have been happier if their potential enemy Ainz was powerless, but in this case, he wanted to believe his friends.

“Oh, General. There was one more favor I wanted to ask. The King of Darkness will bring soldiers with him, so please allow them to fight alongside you.”

“Oh? How many thousands are we talking?”

“Well—”

“I’m terribly sorry to interrupt, General Carvein, Sir Nimble!” someone shouted from outside the tent.

Carvein apologized to Nimble with a look and shouted toward the entrance. “Permission to enter granted!”

The one who came in was a fairly high-ranking knight.

“What is it? It must be an emergency?”

“Sir! A carriage bearing the flag of the King of Darkness has arrived before the gate. We’re being asked to open it. Shall we welcome them as you ordered?”

The knight was looking to Nimble, at whom Carvein then glanced. In response, Nimble gave a nod. “...Understood. Let it through at once.”

“Yes, sir! Should we inspect the carriage first?”

No matter who was inside, they couldn’t let a carriage into the garrison without inspecting it. A basic inspection included using magic to make sure there weren’t any illusions being used as disguises.

In the kingdom, they didn’t go as far as to use magic during their inspections. Probably the only place that had a rule like this was the empire, where magic was a pillar of the state. They knew how terrifying magic could be, so their guard against it was high.

Moreover, at a major military facility like this, they were using the cutting edge in magic technology. If the technology that supported the future of the country was to be leaked, it would be a devastating loss for the empire. That was why the system was set up so that even if Emperor Jircniv came, they performed the same inspection.

Thus, even if it hailed from an allied country—no, precisely because it was from an allied country—examining the carriage was the usual course of action.

But there were some situations that wouldn’t allow for that.

Carvein looked at Nimble again.

Pained by a leaden feeling and a slight pressure in his stomach, plus the weight of the object in his breast pocket, Nimble replied, “General Carvein. I’m truly sorry, but this man is a very important visitor for the empire. This is an extraordinary irregularity among irregularities, an exception among exceptions, but please just let him in.”

The general’s gentle smile changed to a blank look, and the color drained out of his face.

He realized the knight was taking Nimble’s order over his head.

No matter how kind a person, there weren't many who would be happy to have their subordinate take orders from someone else.

And Nimble understood that very well. But it had to be done.

If all else fails...

As he was wondering whether to take out the item in his breast pocket, Carvein spoke.

"I can't argue if it's His Imperial Majesty's orders. It's his country, after all."

"I'm glad you understand, General."

In his pocket were written orders from the emperor. The writing on the parchment gave the person named therein the authority of the emperor. That granted Nimble authority over anything and everything that was associated with the war. Not only did it make Nimble higher ranking than Carvein for the duration of this conflict, he could even dismiss the general if the situation called for it.

Relieved that his friendly relationship hadn't broken down with the older man he respected, he also reined in his emotions because now wasn't the time.

"Well, shall we have a look at this King of Darkness the emperor treats as such an exception? He must be a match for the great heroes."

Personally, Nimble didn't really want to go.

Recalling the warnings of the other Four—well, only three now, including himself—his face became somber. But there was no way he could choose to not go. "Of course I'll accompany you, General Carvein."

At the edge of the barracks, a single magnificent carriage was quietly proceeding under the guidance of a knight. Surprisingly, there was no driver, and the horses weren't anything like normal horses. They weren't sleipnirs, either, but magical beasts with scales.

Nimble alerted the knights in the area, as well as Carvein. "Your deepest bows, please."

What? was the expression on all of their faces. Nimble understood the feeling very well.

One's deepest bow was correct protocol for welcoming the king of an allied country.

But for a visit to a military base, there was no established protocol. Or rather, it was assumed such a visit would never happen.

It was extraordinarily rare to be so open, even when both parties were human, because conflicts breaking out between countries were simply reality.

The deepest bows were for ceremonies in public, in safety, not at military bases. That had to be what the soldiers were thinking.

There was one more thing.

The deepest bows were almost never given on the battlefield.

Most likely because if someone saw their commander giving the deepest possible bow, they might mistake the person on the receiving end as a superior commander. It was an unspoken rule on the battlefield.

He understood the knights' feelings so much it pained him, but...

"Everyone, your deepest bows, please."

He repeated it with a steely voice.

He heard Carvein sigh.

"You heard him. We're welcoming this carriage with our deepest bows."

When Carvein gave the order, the confused knights seemed relieved. If it was an order, all they had to do was obey. No thinking on their part was necessary.

Nimble gave him a grateful glance and saw a snide look on his face for just a moment, as if he was saying, *You have it tough, but I have it tougher.*

The carriage came to a halt in front of the party.

They all gasped for two reasons.

First was how magnificent the carriage was. The primary color was a black that gleamed as if it had been cut from the sea at night, and the frame was covered with elaborate gold accents. But the metal fixtures had the dull shine particular to brass, and the leather displayed a sophisticated coppery hue, so the overall effect was elegant. Perhaps the ornamentation was a bit showy, but the carriage radiated such refinement that it seemed natural. Calling it a treasure chest wouldn't be far off.

Nimble had ridden in the emperor's carriage many times, so he could state with confidence that this one was grander.

The other reason they couldn't help but gasp was the horses. No, they weren't horses. Sharp fangs peeked out of their growling mouths. Reptilian scales coated their bodies completely, and beneath those rippled abnormally robust muscles.

It was like overpowering violence had been molded into the shape of a horse.

An acute sense of caution filled the area. Nimble himself was breathing heavily and felt sweat ooze from his back and hands. The magical beasts seemed shockingly strong.

As he was breathing raggedly in and out, the carriage's door opened.

A dark elf girl got out.

His mind went blank.

Everyone was speechless, their eyes caught.

The girl, holding a black staff, was lovely. She was so beautiful that once she grew up, she would captivate many; undoubtedly, some men would do anything for her love. Her timid expression was reminiscent of a flower blooming stunningly in the moonlight.

But she had equipment on her hands that didn't match her appearance.

Gauntlets.

The one on her left hand looked like something she'd pulled off some evil creature like a demon. The sinister shape was colored mainly in black. Twisted thorns jutted out with sharp points. Though it seemed to be made of metal, it had a grimy sparkle to it, like it was emitting some bizarre secretion. Just the sight of it sent horror coursing through Nimble's body, like his very soul rejected the sight of it.

On her right hand, however, was a gauntlet reminiscent of a pure, innocent girl. It had a smooth make with a base color of snow white. Mysterious gold patterns ran the length of it, but even that decoration served only to further its beauty. This was what it meant to be captivated. It was like standing before a peerlessly beautiful woman—the gauntlet seemed about to suck in his soul.

“Oh, uh, Lord Ainz, it seems that we've arrived.”

“I see. Thanks, Mare.”

Then someone else appeared.

For a moment, the air stagnated.

Everyone got goose bumps at once. The presence flooding the area was different from someone's intent to kill but difficult to describe.

Ainz Ooal Gown was dressed like many arcane casters. First, a raven-black robe. Then a cape on top of that, also black—this was strange, yes. Next, the staff he held, which was splendidly ornate but not to the point of gaudiness. Around his neck hung a necklace featuring a jewel that sparkled silver, and his face was covered with a weird mask.

“We humbly welcome you, King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown.”

Nimble bowed, but he didn't hear anyone else.

Though he knew it was rude, he moved his head to look behind him and saw that the general and the other knights were all still standing stiff as rods.

Overawed by the King of Darkness's presence, they couldn't move. He understood how they felt, but it was a problem.

It was the general, as expected, who offered a helping hand when Nimble began to panic.

“Men!” Carvein barked. It was the tone of a commander, more imposing than anyone would have imagined from this man with such an aristocratic aura. “Your deepest bows for the King of Darkness!”

“Yes, sir!”

A multitude of voices acknowledged the order as they all offered their deepest bows together.

“I appreciate the welcome...famous knights of the empire.”

The King of Darkness’s utterly normal voice was conversely creepy. There was a strange incongruity, like he was putting in a lot of effort to act like a normal person. At least that was the strong sense Nimble got—because he had heard what was lying under the mask.

“Raise your heads.”

No one raised their heads the first time he said it.

“Won’t you raise your heads?”

The second time, they did. Only for the ruler of their own country would they wait for a third.

“King of Darkness, please forgive those who did not immediately raise their heads.” He shifted his gaze and saw that the knights’ lips were white, their faces pale. “It seems they’ve forgotten themselves in their joy at meeting you.”

“No, I apologize. It seems I got a little excited here before the battlefield. Please know that it was not my intention to direct it at you.”

Ainz whipped aside the cape that had been draped over his shoulder. The raven-black fabric fluttered audibly as it spread out, almost like black wings. That same instant, whatever had been enveloping the area in what could be called a chill or heaviness melted away until nothing was left.

Standing before them was someone with the presence of any normal human.

Terrifying.

That was Nimble’s genuine impression.

He had heard from his fellow knights what a monster this was. The fact that he could seem so normal made him all the more frightening. It was like a large predatory beast was slowly sidling up to them.

Even the knights who didn’t know the details must have been struck by the abnormality of the situation. Confusion hung in the air. From Carvein, Nimble sensed comprehension. He must have understood what attitude he needed to take with this person before him, not with his mind but with his heart and soul.

“My name is Nimble Arc Dale Anoch, and I will guide you to the site of your camp.”

“Oh? Well, I’m sorry to trouble you, but thanks.”

“You are quite welcome. Then allow me to introduce a commander of the imperial army, General Carvein.”

“My name is Carvein. King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown. If you

are dissatisfied with any aspect of the base, I am at your service, and know that it will be handled immediately. I'd like to offer a few knights as attendants..."

"That won't be necessary. I have my subordinate here." Ainz pointed at the dark elf girl. "And if anything goes wrong, I'll take care of it myself within reason."

Carvein stiffened.

Behind his offer was the intention of attaching some monitors to make sure the caster didn't do anything strange. They were in a military compound, after all.

But the reply he received was a flat refusal. Only someone with power would be able to give such an answer.

But Carvein, in his position, couldn't let that go. At this rate, they wouldn't get anywhere no matter how far they went.

Nimble was mentally on Carvein's side, but there was no way he could answer those feelings with action.

"I see... Well, if you need anything, please let us know. That's how we'll do it, General Carvein."

"Understood."

"Oh... I forgot something."

"What is it, King of Darkness?"

"The plan is for one of my spells to start the war, but I was thinking about having part of my army join the battle. I'd appreciate your permission."

"That is more than we could have hoped for..." As he had been briefed earlier, Carvein accepted it immediately. But he did furrow his brow. "However, the fight will begin within the next few days, possibly as early as the day after tomorrow. How far away are your forces? I'm afraid we won't be able to wait for them..."

"That's no problem. They're already nearby."

Nimble wondered about that. He hadn't spotted anything even resembling an army anywhere near the garrison.

It seemed like Carvein wondered the same thing. Naturally, there was a thick security net of knights patrolling the perimeter. If anyone but imperial forces approached, word would have surely reached the general. He looked to his subordinates in the area, his eyes asking if they had mismanaged any reports, but none of them seemed to have heard anything.

"Sorry. It may have been misleading to say they're nearby. What I meant is, they can be here at any time."

"I see..." Carvein didn't understand, but he decided to set it aside and asked a different question. "And how many are there?"

"About five hundred, I'd say."

"Five hundred?" Carvein skillfully hid it, but Nimble didn't miss

his disappointment. “Carvein, the King of Darkness’s forces can be lined up alongside ours, correct?”

The empire had to shed the most blood to demonstrate its loyalty to Ainz. It would be preferable if his forces acted only in case of an emergency, but there would be no problems if they formed ranks together.

“Five hundred shouldn’t require a change to our formation, and I’m sure you would like your own soldiers to guard you.”

The implication was, *Please don’t participate aggressively in the attack*. To show the empire’s sincerity, it had to be the party shedding the blood. It wouldn’t help their positions if Ainz’s forces did all the heavy lifting.

Ainz nodded in satisfaction at Nimble’s comment. Nimble was secretly relieved, but when he thought about it, it was only natural. What could he expect to do with five hundred soldiers anyhow? They were probably meant more as an honor guard than anything.

But what happened next was beyond anything Nimble had imagined.

Ainz activated some kind of spell and spoke into space. “Can you hear me? Shalltear? Open a Gate here and send over the troops.” Ainz’s eyes seemed to move behind his mask.

“All right, General, I’ve summoned my army.”

As he finished speaking, the commotion began.

Something that appeared to be a dark half circle appeared, floating behind Ainz.

Gate. The word flickered across Nimble’s mind.

The gate opened, and the figures who emerged were...

—All noise ceased.

A strange atmosphere and a heavy silence dominated the space. It was as if the sound of stillness had flooded the area.

The five hundred soldiers appeared. It was a paltry amount compared to the empire’s sixty thousand. But it was impossible to underestimate a single one of them.

The odd forces arrayed before them spoke louder than words.

“This is my army.” Ainz merrily introduced his troops to the speechless onlookers.

Intermission

The young girl seated in the sole chair—a throne—of a luxurious but not terribly large room raised her voice, which anyone would have said was innocent and befitting her age.

“All right! I’m leaving it up to you!”

“Yes, Your Majesty! You can count on me!”

The man who seemed to be a knight stood up from his prostrate position in front of the little girl, his head bowed, before leaving the room in a self-assured manner.

The door closed, and a few seconds later, the girl asked her prime minister next to her, “Is it okay now?”

“Yes. He was the last one, so it’s no problem.”

At the sound of the man’s cool voice, the little girl’s cute, naive expression crumpled.

She sulked—that was the only way to describe it.

Perhaps because she was tired, her eyes went dull and half-closed, her lips warped into a frown, and her shoulders slumped.

“I feel horrible.”

She was acting less like a little girl and more like an exhausted woman in her forties. But her voice sounded youthful. It was like her external youth had remained, but her insides had changed.

“You must be tired.”

“I really am. I’d really like to quit this form.” She picked up the hem of her skirt. “There’s something disturbing about these clothes that leave my legs hanging out.”

“I’ve told you many times, Your Majesty, but there’s nothing that can be done.”

This girl was queen of the Dragon Kingdom, the Black Scale Dragonlord, Draudillon Oryukules.

She was called a dragonlord, but her combat ability was the same as any average person’s. Incidentally, according to the Theocracy’s criteria, she was a true dragonlord, but since it amounted only to the powers she was born with, she was also sometimes known by the rare

term *true yet false dragonlord*.

The issue was that being true or false depended on whether one could use primeval magic or not.

“The reason everyone works so hard if you’re in this form is that it stimulates their urge to protect you.”

“Does everyone have a loli complex? I think being bigger feels better in all kinds of ways...”

Draudillon held her hands in front of her flat chest and jigglingly mimed something.

“That form certainly does have its—”

“Don’t say ‘form’! That’s my real body!”

“Do excuse me, Your Majesty.”

“Oh, c’mon, I can tell you don’t have any intention of apologizing whatsoever.”

“That’s not true.”

Gazing at her prime minister’s cold smile and unable to read the emotions behind it, Draudillon averted her eyes in frustration.

“You seem to understand. Back to the point, it’s true that you might be more popular with men in that form, but that’s not the case with women. In contrast, with this form, we can expect nice reactions from everyone regardless of sex or age. You understand that, I’m sure. If you want to assume the other form, you should wait until after we make a breakthrough in the country’s current situation. Do you have any bright ideas?”

“...Don’t call it a ‘form.’”

“That said, at the rate we’re going, you’ll be able to take whatever form you like. There will be no one left to see it anyway!”

The thought of the Dragon Kingdom’s current state caused a heavy silence to fall between them.

“So this beastman invasion will be different from the others?”

“Without a doubt. I hardly think that great host’s main objective could be the same as the piddling armies that have come up until now. Surely, they mean to bring down our nation. It seems like they’re determined to put up livestock pens or something.”

Near the Dragon Kingdom was the country of the beastmen.

Beastmen were subhumans who were like lions or tigers—carnivorous beasts—who walked on two legs. One look at their heads was enough to tell they were meat eaters, and naturally, their diet included humans.

Races that ate humans weren’t rare. In three of the six great countries competing in the center of the continent, humans were food. In the troll country a little removed from the central area, they were such human connoisseurs that the best food for entertaining guests was human fetuses that were about six months along.

To meat eaters like that, this country was just hordes of food gathered together.

Up until this point, perhaps because the beastmen had seen them as food that would multiply on its own if they let it be, there hadn't been a full-scale invasion. But for some reason, the latest attack was gigantic, and three cities had already fallen.

The feasting going on out there was enough to make even the queen feel sick.

Naturally, since there was no way to negotiate with this external enemy, the nation had come together against it. They were trying to cope, but beastmen simply had different base stats compared to humans.

Just as indicated by the fact that one of the major countries in the center of the continent belonged to the beastmen, their physical abilities far surpassed those of humans.

For example, if a human and a beastman grew up in the same manner, the beastman's stats would be ten times greater than the human's.

In adventurer circles, they had established difficulty ratings—numbers measuring the strength of monsters. If an adult human was 3, then an adult beastman was 30. Mysteriously, yet perhaps because average beastman strength was so high, there weren't a great number of incredibly powerful individuals; that was the sole saving grace.

"For now, a group of adventurers rallying around the adamantite plates is fighting them off, but they're outnumbered. They aren't able to stop the various armies—they must be tribal units or something... Our only option may be to gather all the people in the capital and wait for our opponents' food supply to run out, but I fear our food situation will worsen first."

"My head hurts. The future is too dark."

"Otherwise, we could send in a select team to bash their heads in? It may only invite their fury, but if we can't stop the invasion, we should at least do what we can."

"And the leader of that team would be that guy, I suppose?"

"Yes, him."

There was only one person the pair could be referring to: "Furious Flash" Celebrate of the adamantite-plate adventurer team Crystal Tear. He used a fencing technique called Effulgent Sword, hence the nickname, and his class was holy lord.

"That guy definitely has a loli complex. Whenever we're talking, his eyes are just plastered to my body. Does he really get such a kick out of this flat thing? Why not just look at the wall, then?"

"Because it's a fetish. Yes, it's true, Your Majesty. He has a loli complex."

Draudillon's face twitched.

"I wasn't asking you to make a definitive declaration... I wish our nation's adamantite plates were a little more normal..."

"What are you talking about? All you have to do is play the part of a cute, pure child and he'll fight like mad for you. Isn't he actually extremely convenient for us?"

"But I'm going to have to fulfill his desires at some point! ...Hey! Don't look at me like I'm the pork for tomorrow's breakfast!"

Her subordinate heaved a conspicuous sigh, and she practically popped a blood vessel.

"Isn't that all, though, Your Majesty? Please just bear it. You're still better off than the people who are literally being eaten."

She couldn't argue with that.

"...If I had the money, I would hire Optix full-time, but what is the Theocracy even doing anyway?"

"Hmm, I'm afraid I have no idea."

"In past years, they contributed to no small degree. Now is about the time they usually come to help us out, right? I'm not saying they have to send the Black Scripture, but why don't they at least dispatch the Sunlit one?"

The Theocracy had been secretly sending in forces to save the Dragon Kingdom. It wasn't much, but they probably helped because she was the head of the country.

"This is what we get for leaving our national defense up to another country. How sad."

"It's not like we wanted to! We had no choice. You know that. Our military expenses are already pushing it. If we try to increase them any further, we'll go broke! Plus, even if we allocate money, it's not like the soldiers will immediately be stronger." The Dragon Kingdom had long been spending quite a sum on a yearly basis to counter the beastmen threat, and this was what had come of it. But she wanted to think that spending what they had had kept damages lower than they might have been. "If the Theocracy has abandoned us... Right. What if we asked the empire for help? If we fall, the next will be the empire, right?"

"The Katze Plain is there, so it won't be the empire straightaway. They could also go around the lake and strike the Theocracy."

"...Yeah, maybe they aren't brave enough to plunge into a zone where tons of undead spawn."

Incidentally, both of them excluded the wyvern-tamer race in between.

"It's less about bravery and more that they can't eat undead. There's no point in conquering them. The only ones who would be happy to take that territory are other undead. Plus, isn't the empire

busy? It's almost time for their annual war, right?"

"It's a bit late this year."

"Hmm, yes, it's about half a year late. We got this proclamation about some caster, if you'd like to see it."

"Eh, who cares about the situation in other countries? We need to worry about how to save our own country!"

"Aren't you the one who brought it up, Your Majesty? ...What about using your magic?"

The prime minister waved a finger around. That must have been what he imagined magic to be. Draudillon winced.

"Primeval magic? That's not the sort of thing a person—even someone with an eighth of dragon's blood—can control. One wrong move and I could end up assisting in the country's downfall. It's our last resort."

"Our last resort? I hope the day we need it will never come. All right, I'm going to request support from the Theocracy."

"Okay! Thanks!"

Draudillon responded in a naive, childlike manner, and the prime minister looked coldly at her. "That's it, Your Majesty. If you can find the wherewithal to do that, it seems like you can write thirty letters to encourage the commanders at the front—tell them a little girl believes in them. And of course, make sure to do it with a child's handwriting."

"Blegh. I can't do that sober. Bring me a drink."

"Understood. I don't mind if you get wasted, just please make sure the work gets done today."

The prime minister bowed and left the room.

Seeing him off, Draudillon looked down at her hands.

"Spirit magic, huh?"

Primeval magic was different from normal magic in that it was cast with souls. If she sacrificed a ton of her people, then connected and broke down their souls, she would probably be able to use an immensely powerful spell. She could probably even imitate the huge explosion her great-grandfather had told her about—the Platinum Dragonlord's ultimate attack.

That said, she was far weaker than a dragon, so even an optimistic estimate meant the spell required a million sacrifices.

Draudillon buried her face in her hands, trembling at the feeling that it was hell that awaited her no matter what happened.



Chapter 3 | Another Battle

1

Headed north, away from the commotion of the army preparing to head to the Katze Plain, Prince Barbro Andréan Yeld Ryle Vaiself was in a foul mood.

“Shit. Damn you, Marquis Raeven...”

He couldn’t hold back the curse.

Since his younger brother had borrowed some of Marquis Raeven’s men and patrolled the capital to keep the peace during the demon disturbance, he had given the nobles the impression he was the type who could stand and fight on the front lines in an emergency. That made the opinion of the nobles who had been supporting Barbro as the next king begin to waver. There was also the fact that Marquis Raeven was supporting the second prince—some of the nobles had already switched sides.

Not putting himself out there during the demon disturbance was a fatal mistake.

The reason he was unable to leave the palace and join the front lines was that he didn’t have any men under him.

That in itself was the correct judgment. Even if he had gone to the front, there wasn’t anything he could have done as an individual. He would have only gotten in the way. The demons could have also assaulted the palace.

His brother wouldn’t have been able to go on patrol without the use of Marquis Raeven’s troops.

Barbro was confident that he had made the right decision to stay put. But the fools didn’t understand that and were tricked by appearances. In the end, everything went according to Marquis Raeven’s plan.

“Doesn’t anyone understand his aims? Plus, all they did was patrol—it’s not as if they actually participated in the fight against the demons!”

If his brother had been on the actual battlefield, it would have been revealed how pathetic he was. In that sense, Marquis Raeven had a brilliant mind.

And there was one other thing that offended Barbro.

How miserable it was to be headed to Carne, that desolate village.

He was falling behind in the struggle for the throne.

In this fight against the empire, he needed to score some achievements and look like the eldest prince he was supposed to be. He had to show the world that he was fit to be the next king; the reputation his brother had stolen from him would be his once more.

That made this battle with the empire critical, but instead of participating, he had been ordered to conduct this trivial job like an errand boy. Where was the honor in riding to a frontier village and investigating its link to Ainz Ooal Gown?

Just then, a chill went up his spine.

Could it be that the orders were meant to prevent his achieving anything?

Father already decided on my brother, and he doesn't want me to do anything that might result in my comeback. That's why he sent me to this nowhere village...

His breath grew labored. His heart was burning with hatred for his father for passing him up and yielding the throne to his little brother just because he happened to show a little bravery.

It was only by chance that he noticed the person riding next to him despite his agitated tunnel vision.

"Prince, are you feeling ill? Shall I call a priest?"

The shrill voice from so near grated on his brain as if it were echoing and made him want to vomit. But he held back. It was thanks in part to the chilly winter air but also his daily-life training in glossing over things as a member of the royal family.

Showing one's true emotions was foolish.

"No, no, don't worry. I was just thinking about this job my father gave me and how best to get it done. More importantly, Baron Nosmartz, you went to visit the adamantite-plate adventurer Momon, right? How did it go?"

"I'll tell you, Prince! It's most dreadful! Momon was out, so I didn't get to meet him at all!"

"Well, these things happen. He's an adamantite-rank adventurer after all. Why are you so upset about it? You didn't have an appointment. What could you expect?"

"No! Not like that. What I found offensive was his partner, Nabe!"

"Nabe? Ohh, 'Beautiful Princess'?"

Barbro remembered the peerless beauty he had seen in the capital. She was as lovely as his youngest sister. He wanted her, but she was

one of the team of adventurers his father had been rewarding. He couldn't just do as he pleased like a commoner.

"So what did that gorgeous woman do to you?"

"She was violent! Take a look at this!"

Nosmartz removed his gauntlet to reveal a big blue bruise.

"What? Adamantite plate or not, she's not allowed to perpetrate violence against a noble!"

"And yet she suddenly grabbed my hand and threw me out."

This wasn't enough information to go on. Barbro quit taking him seriously. There had to be some reason for it that the baron was hiding.

"Prince! I beg you, bring your iron hammer down on that foolish wench!"

Can I use this to my advantage and get her to do whatever I want?

Barbro wondered.

Was there a way to give the baron a hand while also making that woman his? He couldn't think of one. It was this idiot baron he was dealing with; the man would probably consider the prince indebted to him.

This guy really is useless. Well, for now I'll stay close to him, and once I'm king, he'll be the first I cut off. Until then, I'll use him as best I can.

But even as he was making those calculations, the reality sank to the pit of his stomach that even this man had his own territory and military strength, yet he didn't—he had to borrow forces if he wanted to fight.

In response to the baron's expectant eyes, Barbro made the same empty promise. "I'll take that into account when I am king!"

"Thank you, Your Highness!"

Barbro didn't want to talk to that bowing moron anymore, so he turned to one of Marquis Beauleurope's knights who was riding nearby. He was one of the commanders of the marquis's elite forces.

"Hey, there's something I want to ask you."

"What is it, Your Highness?"

Actually, there wasn't anything. But he couldn't very well say it was a convenient way to cut off the conversation with the baron. When he paused briefly to come up with an appropriate question, the unpleasant thoughts from earlier came back.

The whole reason Barbro was headed for the frontier village was that Marquis Beauleurope had suggested it. Which meant...

Did the marquis betray me? Has he defected to my brother's side?

He wanted to believe it couldn't be true.

He had taken the man's daughter as his wife and gotten along well with him as his son-in-law. If Barbro succeeded to the throne, Marquis Beauleurope would be the most important of the six great nobles. If he

switched to Barbro's brother's side, he would only end up in conflict with Marquis Raeven. But what other reason could there have been for him to suggest this?

So then I...I was sent to this desolate village so they could spread the idea that I'm not doing anything useful in the war?

"Did you need something, Your Highness? Shall we take a break?"

"—Shut up."

The loathing he couldn't smother leaked out.

He could see that the knight was surprised, but he still couldn't hold himself back.

Spitting murder from the gap between his teeth, Barbro said, "I have orders for you. We're going to get this Carne business over quickly and head for the Katze Plain. Make those preparations in parallel to our current activities. If we arrive in Carne, accomplish our mission immediately, and head right back, we should reach E-Rantel by nightfall. We'll get what little sleep we can and head for the Katze Plain before sunrise."

The knight furrowed his brow.

"With all due respect, I think that would be extremely difficult. Please look at this: Our formation includes the marquis's three thousand five hundred soldiers and one thousand five hundred from the nobles backing Your Highness for a total of five thousand. In order to get our job done in a short amount of time, we are bringing fifty wagons filled with supplies instead of hordes of logistics men."

"I know that, so what's the problem?"

"The breakdown is four thousand five hundred foot soldiers and five hundred on horseback. Even if we resolve the Carne matter in under an hour, it would be quite a rush to get back to E-Rantel by nightfall."

"But I asked you a question. I'll ask again: What's the problem? We'll just rush if we need to rush."

"Prince... Some of the foot soldiers will be exhausted."

"You seem to be misunderstanding something. Honestly, there is no good reason for us to be going to this tiny, remote village. What we need to do is defeat the empire on the Katze Plain. You're one of the marquis's men, aren't you? Then I ask you: Is this a war in which we can afford to have five thousand men do nothing? Is that what you think?"

The knight pursed his lips.

"Don't prioritize the wrong things. Some of the foot soldiers will be exhausted? Whip them so they keep running. You've been gathered here to fight on the Katze Plain."

And to enhance my reputation.

"...You're right, Your Highness. Understood."

The knight bowed his head.

“That’s how you should be responding in the first place! Plot out what time we’ll reach E-Rantel and what time we’ll leave again. The details are your responsibility.”

“Yes, Your Highness. I’ll meet with the others right away and return with the answer you desire.”

The knight racing his horse over to his fellow commanders was already gone from Barbro’s mind.

Does my father hate me? Or is he so senile he can no longer arrive at the correct decision? Is that why he’s trying to give my brother the throne? It should go to the eldest. If it doesn’t, he’ll antagonize the nobles.

He was determined to turn his utterly disadvantaged situation around. He would make them regret giving him five thousand men.

Those were the thoughts that spurred Barbro on.

“Baron!”

“Y-yes, Your Highness!”

“I’m expecting a lot out of you!”

He had the feeling the thrilled voice was saying something, but it went in the right ear and out the left.

Damn you, Zanak. You can just stay in the capital regretting the mess you made.

The man was his brother, and they shared blood, but in the race for the throne, he was an enemy to kick out of his way. And it wasn’t as if he loved him or anything. He wasn’t about to kill him, but if he got in his way, he wouldn’t hesitate to.

When I’m king...what can I do with him? Should I kill him so he doesn’t become some idiot noble’s rallying cause? Would that be a waste? If he were a woman, there would be all sorts of uses for him, but... He’s not very smart, but our little sister is. I should sell her to the highest bidder... I wouldn’t want the royal bloodline to continue through her, so the best would be to marry her into a far-off country’s royal family, but... Well, if she’ll be useful in building my power base, I can think it over a little more.

Barbro’s eyes became distant, entranced in his ideal vision of the Re-Estize Kingdom.

Him seated on the throne, the nobles before him bowing their heads...

His retainers, who carried out every order he gave...

“That would be great.”

He caught himself smirking a bit and quickly covered it with a hand.

Right now, they would finish their business in Carne, and then the question would be how fast they could get to E-Rantel. Whether his dreams came true or not would depend on that branch in the path.

...Assuming I force the soldiers to hurry—the important thing is to make it back before the war starts. Or what if we waited for it to start and then went in as an ambush?

He thought it was a very good idea, but he wasn't sure he could maneuver his troops into position to strike from their flank or behind.

He would have liked to leave it up to the knights, but putting other people in charge didn't seem like a good plan given that the goal was to achieve something that would win him the throne.

As he was trying to think about what he could do to shine the brightest and be selected as the next king, he had a flash of inspiration.

Could I use the people of Carne to negotiate with Ainz Ooal Gown?

It was as if a ray of light was gleaming down from above.

This was the optimal plot.

Regardless of why Ainz Ooal Gown saved the people of Carne, Barbro felt he should be able to use them as bargaining chips.

If this caster Ainz Ooal Gown, whom he'd never heard of, backed out of the war, the empire would lose its casus belli and be forced to withdraw unless they wanted to be labeled as invaders.

And if what caused the empire's withdrawal was Barbro's actions...

That would be wonderful! Father wouldn't be able to ignore my opinion anymore. I would practically be guaranteed to be king.

"Good! Most excellent."

If Ainz Ooal Gown just happened to save Carne as he was passing by, he might not pull out of the war. In that case, he could hand the villagers weapons and force them to fight. This was a general mobilization of the nation. The villagers of Carne would have no way to refuse.

It seemed the king had pardoned them for not responding to the draft, but that was before the situation changed. When playing things by ear on the ground, it was up to the commander—Barbro, in this case.

If Ainz Ooal Gown killed the farmers of Carne, then that just showed what kind of person he was, and they could use it as propaganda. That would tie in to anti-empire propaganda because it was backing him.

Barbro trembled at the perfection of his plan.

If he was honest, he had thought his brother was the smarter one, but apparently that wasn't the case. He was moved to find so much ability latent within himself.

For a small village, winter was hell. It was days of waiting inside thinking of warmer seasons. If spring was late or autumn's harvest wasn't big enough, they would resort to eating their rice seed and sometimes still starve to death.

There wasn't much fieldwork, but life in a farming village meant work was never hard to find. There was a huge amount of labor to do at home. Tending to livestock; repairing farming tools; and the house, shed, and stables needed maintaining, too—there was no time to rest.

And in Carne, they had started raising pigs so they wouldn't have to rely solely on the rangers' hunting to feed the meat-eating ogres. They had been able to buy the pigs with the earnings the valuable herbs brought in.

The goblins would take the pigs into the Tove Woodlands and have them eat tree roots and the like. They had only a few because the project was still in its experimental stages, but if things went well and they made it through the winter with the pigs, they would probably increase their number in the future.

Normally if farmers put animals out to graze, they would have to pay a tax to the owner of the land, but luckily Carne didn't have to. The Tove Woodlands were home to monsters; they weren't considered part of the human realm.

Carne's future was bright.

And it was all thanks to Ainz Ooal Gown, who had saved the village and supported it in all sorts of ways, as well as the warrior of Raven Black, Momon, who tamed the Wise King of the Forest. Many of the villagers were grateful to them. Some even named them alongside the gods in their prayers over breakfast.

Because they were overflowing with hope, the new village headwoman, Enri Emmott, had a lot of work to do.

At it again that day, Enri, accompanied by Nfirea, was headed for a shed.

In a small frontier village like Carne, all the residents operated together like a family. If they didn't, they wouldn't be able to survive. They shared farming implements, helped one another out with food, and even took turns using the oxen to plow their fields.

So the villagers all took care of the livestock, and they jointly managed their feed. This was the shed where they stockpiled the hay that served as the oxen's food during the winter months.

Enri opened the door and went inside. Nfirea followed a moment after. Enri continued straight in to the mountain of hay and sat down.

Her butt sank in.

Nfirea closed the door and sat next to her. He used a spell to cast white light throughout the area.

"Headwoman, save the playtime for later. I need you to check if there is enough hay and make a bunch of decisions."

"You called me 'headwoman' again..."

Nfirea chuckled slightly at her dejected voice.

"Eh, it's fine if you want to call me 'headwoman'! After all, it's a small thing compared to Arg and his buddies thinking that if I tried, I could crush goblins with my bare hands!"

After she won every arm-wrestling match against Arg and the others, even the villagers seemed to be wondering if maybe the rumors were true, which was like a stake through her heart. Incidentally, the ogres didn't participate. If she had lost against them, she wouldn't have made the right impression, and if she had somehow won or even put up a good fight, she would have never recovered.

If I miss my chance with Nfi, I may never be able to get married!

Her hands got sweaty, which she hated.

"Oh, should I go open the window? It's dry outside now anyway, so it won't matter if we open it."

"Huh? It's fine, isn't it? Plus, I already made us a magic light."

"Are you sure? If you're okay with it, then I'm fine."

The magic light was brighter than sunlight. All Enri meant was that, since it was still light out, maybe it was a waste to use magic. Well, she also wanted to change the mood. There was no special reason, so she didn't care that he said no. But Nfirea reacted in a weird way. And his ears were bright red.

Did he use up that much mana? From what I've heard, just a magic light doesn't make you that tired... Maybe he cast some spells before we came here? Actually, he smells kind of good, different from the usual herb smell...

"Wh-what, Enri?"

She had brought her nose closer to him and taken a whiff. His voice became panic-stricken.

"Hmm? Mmm...nothing. Something smelled good, that's all."

"O-oh? Well that makes me happy. It's cologne I made."

"Wow, are you going to sell it in town? You could probably fetch a pretty good price."

"N-no, that wasn't really the idea..."

"Hmm. Well, whatever. Anyhow, the hay here is fine. Ready to go to the next one?"

"Y-y-yeah. But first, let's check some things here. It's cold outside."

"...It's not very warm in here, either, but... Well, it's fine."

“S-so there are several things I’d like to discuss with you.”

Nfirea seemed nervous next to her.

I wonder what’s wrong.

His profile bathed in Enri’s questioning gaze, Nfirea took out a sheaf of papers.

They were covered in tiny letters. Enri had learned to read somewhat, but as far as she could see from a peek, there were a lot of words she didn’t know.

“The first thing is the procurement of food for Arg and the survivors of his goblin tribe and the ogres.”

“What? Aren’t we fine for now? They helped us out with the fall wheat harvest, and we bought food for the ogres from town.”

“Yeah, and thanks to the expensive herbs we sold, we were able to buy enough food. We definitely have enough to weather one winter. We’ll be all right even if the population increases a little. But I realized we might run into trouble if the numbers go up much more, so maybe we should think about another way to obtain food.”

There were already fourteen goblins from Arg’s tribe living in the village now. It wasn’t as if they were reproducing. That was just how many had fled from the Magical Serpent of the West and the Giant of the East.

“Hrm. I think we’re all right, but should we go back to E-Rantel to buy more food just in case? Really, I wanted to save some money and buy iron farming equipment.”

“If we had iron implements for the ogres, clearing the land in the spring would go so much more quickly... I guess the only problem is that people would think something was weird if we ordered ogre-size tools that humans wouldn’t be able to use.”

“Would it cause trouble if people found out we had ogres working in the village?”

When the tax collector had visited in the fall, she’d made Jugemu and all the subhumans hide. They hid their portions of the wheat harvest, too, which was quite a lot.

Since the government understood that Carne had been attacked by imperial knights, they were allowed to get away with fewer taxes, which was a lucky break. They had also been exempted from labor requests for several years.

It wasn’t just an apology for not being able to protect them; the officials really did seem to feel guilty. Enri thought they would be suspicious of the splendid wall surrounding the village, but all she had to say was, “The great caster...,” and they accepted it without probing further. That made Enri think maybe they could get away with the ogres, too, but then Nfirea dispelled that hope.

“Definitely trouble. In a worst-case scenario, a team would be sent

to exterminate them.”

“That’s awful!”

“You can be mad, but there’s nothing I can do about it. Usually ogres are dangerous monsters that eat humans. Don’t forget that the only reason we’re coexisting with them is because Jugemu and the others are more powerful.”

“I haven’t forgotten...”

“The other issue I wanted to talk about is how we’ll recruit more people to come live here, since we don’t have enough hands. It would be great if they came around the time of the spring land clearing.”

“That could be tricky. And what you were just saying makes me think it might be a pain because people will see the goblins and ogres and run for— What?” Enri asked. Nfirea had been acting weird the whole time, like he wasn’t really present in the moment.

“Huh?! Oh, uh, nothing.”

She had trouble believing it was nothing. Maybe he was tired again? Her boyfriend had the bad habit of losing himself in potion creation.

When Enri furrowed her brow, Nfirea took a deep breath and leaned on her.

Hmm? So maybe he is tired? It does seem like he’s doing a lot of experiments every day... But I think it’s a bit cold to sleep here. Inside the hay, it’s probably warm, but...

As she was thinking those things, Nfirea’s body grew gradually heavier as he leaned on her.

I wonder what’s wrong. He should really get a little stronger... He needs to eat a lot of meat. I can’t encourage his lifestyle of forgoing food and sleep to work.

Enri suddenly felt like teasing him, so she decided to apply pressure in return. She meant it to be a light prod, but she ended up really pushing.

“Uwhe!”

Nfirea looked at Enri in shock and confusion. His face was bright red.

Yeah, it’s embarrassing for a guy to lose to a girl, isn’t it? Then you better eat your meat.

When she relaxed, Nfirea, with his eyes closed, flopped over onto the hay.

For a few seconds, it was quiet between them.

“...What’s wrong, Nfi? Did you get tired?”

He sat up, looking bizarrely red. “N-n-nah. It’s nothing; I’m fine.”

“Lady Enri!”

The door was opened without so much as a knock and so forcefully that it made a loud *bang*.

“Heegh!” A strange cry escaped Nfirea. “Wh-wh-why?”

“Very sorry to bother ya! But it’s an emergency!”

“What’s going on?”

Enri hadn’t seen Jugemu so worked up since the troll attack. An awful feeling slunk up her spine.

“There’s an army! An army is headed this way!”

“What? What in the world? Which country’s army is it?”

“Since we don’t know the crests, we’re not sure yet. But there was more than one, so...we went ahead and closed the gate! What should we do?”

“Umm! Umm, what coat of arms did you see the most of? I might recognize it.”

As Nfirea listened to Jugemu’s explanation, a clearly puzzled look appeared on his face.

“That’s strange. That’s the kingdom’s flag. If I knew the nobles’ crests, I would be able to tell who it was, but...”

Carne was a frontier village; beyond it was nothing but woodlands. That meant their destination had to be Carne, but there wasn’t any reason for them to come.

“Why in the world are they coming here? Do you have any idea, Nfi?”

“You mean why the kingdom’s army is heading to our village? If they were aiming for the Tove Woodlands, it would be weird to bring the military. They would just send adventurers instead. Other than that...maybe a civil war?”

“Could that really be it?”

“I heard that our king isn’t actually very strong. Apparently, the nobles and he are locked in a power struggle. So maybe they’re coming to Carne because we’re a part of the king’s domain and they want to attack it?”

Enri could practically hear the blood draining from her face—because their village might once again be subjected to the horrors of invasion.

But we’re not the same as we used to be.

Enri faced the issue head-on.

“Let’s have at least some of the people escape into the forest before the troops arrive!”

“...Sorry, Lady Enri, we noticed them too late, so if we ran now, we’d have to leave everything behind. It’s also winter, and when there’s a good chance monsters will come out of the forest, we would have our hands full just guarding against that.”

Enri shuddered at Jugemu’s pained expression.

If the army burned down their village during this cold season, they would have no chance of survival.

“Then... Then yes! If we can’t take the food and things with us, let’s prepare to fight while we hide as much as we can!”

“Yeah, that’s a brilliant plan, Enri! The cellar we used to hide the ogres, Jugemu, and everyone when the tax collector came shouldn’t be full yet. Let’s put everything in there!”

Ready to leap into action, Enri realized she hadn’t asked a critical question.

How many. How many villagers they would need depended on how many soldiers there were.

“How many are there? A hundred or so?”

“No...”

The way Jugemu trailed off, Enri was seized with the urge to plug her ears.

“More than that... A few thousand.”

Enri blinked. Nfirea next to her did the same.

“It seemed like at least four thousand.”

“What the...? Why so many...?”

“I can’t imagine what they’re thinking. What reason could there possibly be to send that many soldiers to this village...? Enri, is there any possibility that word about the goblins got out?”

“No, definitely not,” Enri answered immediately.

She could think all she wanted, but there was no reason that information would have leaked out. There were the new transplants, but they were mainly the sort of people who trusted the goblins more than humans. And ever since the troll attack, the transplants and the locals had really come together as a community.

The only other people were the adventurers who visited from the city—they were gone by now, but Nfirea was confident that Momon and Nabe wouldn’t have leaked the info.

“Then... We should prepare to escape and ask them why they’ve come. Fighting should be...our last resort.”

Trying to fight four thousand soldiers was utter suicide.

“As ya say, Master Nfi, that’s our only option... Going up against that many would be impossible.”

“Yeah. So we’ll buy time with the idea of escaping in mind. Okay, let’s go!”

They had the villagers who had been preparing to defend near the gate go and hide food with the ogres. Enri, Jugemu, and the goblin troop, plus Brita and a few members of the self-defense squad were the only ones who remained. Brita had arrived ahead of the others, and Enri had questions for her. The first one, naturally, was who was coming—which nobles’ flags they were—but unfortunately, Brita didn’t have the answer.

She said she had left staying on top of that sort of information to someone else. It was a moment that made the value of knowledge sink in for Enri, so she waited for Nfirea to come back with his report from the watchtower.

From over the wall came the sound of multiple horses' hooves, then a raised voice.

"I have come as a messenger for the eldest prince, His Highness Barbro Andréan Yeld Ryle Vaiself of the Re-Estize Kingdom. Open this gate and let us in!"

Enri could hardly believe her ears.

She had heard a lot of surprising things in the past ten minutes, but this one may have taken the cake.

"Th-the eldest prince?!"

Why is such a lofty person here?

It was so puzzling she wondered if she was dreaming.

But Nfirea nearly tripped over himself racing back from the watchtower and confirmed that what the messenger said was true.

"The king's flag is in there with the others. Only someone directly related to the royal family can use it!"

"Huh? So what does that mean?"

"It means a member of the royal family came here leading an army!"

With no idea what was going on, Enri suddenly shouted, "Wh-why would he bring an army to a tiny frontier village like this?!"

"How would the villagers know? We're in the king's domain, so doing what the prince says is the right way to handle this. Or would you rather disobey and revolt?!"

Enri shivered.

Opening the gate was the right thing to do as a subject of the kingdom. *But...*

She exchanged glances with Jugemu, who was standing next to her.

She couldn't open the gate. She had to let the goblins and ogres hide first.

"Ah, m'lady. We'll hole up in the hideout as fast as we can. Please buy time for us till then."

Enri nodded. She regretted giving the instructions to hide the food there, but it was too late now.

"I repeat. Open the gate!"

"M-my apologies! Right now, we're preparing to receive the prince! Please wait a little longer!"

"We'll just go back and forth again, woman! Are you the one in charge of this village? Open the gate this instant!"

"...Why are you in such a hurry?!" Enri shouted in anxiety. She

understood quite well that it was impolite, but she thought it might be another country's army only pretending to be the kingdom's.

Carne had beefed up its defenses to the point that the tax collector was taken aback.

Would it be so strange if another country wanted to use the village as a fortress? After all, the trolls tried to make it their lair.

For the first time, the response was silence. There was hesitation in the air.

"Why aren't you answering?! You must not actually be kingdom soldiers!" she shouted, her voice hoarse from panic and irritation. That finally got a reply.

"...A caster called Ainz Ooal Gown once came to this town, correct?"

The image of the village's savior came to Enri's mind.

"That caster has antagonized the kingdom. So since you've had contact with him, we want to make some inquiries."

Enri was so shocked she couldn't say anything.

But one of the self-defense squad members spoke in a low voice only their side could hear. "If that great man antagonized the kingdom, then the kingdom must be in the wrong."

All the villagers' eyes said they agreed.

Especially marked was the reaction of the transplants, the ones whose villages had been burned. Their hatred of the kingdom for not protecting them had been channeled into the trust they had for the passerby caster who saved the village.

That he gave them items that summoned goblins, offered golems to help them build thick walls, and sent a maid to rescue them when a troll attacked only made them trust him more.

"Is opening the gate the right thing to do?"

"...It's quite an army. If we don't open it..."

"We couldn't possibly betray him, after all he's done for us..."

"Wait! They only said they want to make inquiries. Responding to them won't necessarily be a betrayal, you know."

"Oh? But if it ended up that way, we would be utter ingrates..."

All eyes gathered on Enri.

She understood everyone's feelings extremely well. She was stuck between a rock and a hard place. As she was fretting, another shout came over the wall.

"Do you understand? If so, open this gate at once! If you resist any longer, we'll assume you're rebelling against the kingdom!"

Cornered, Enri hoped to buy a little more time by shouting, "There are cow droppings all over in front of the gate! We couldn't possibly have the prince enter through such a mess!"

After a brief silence, the messenger seemed to have gotten himself

together. “Ah, hmm. I see. Then let’s do this: We won’t have the prince enter. Let me in! The rest we can decide afterward.”

She didn’t have any more excuses.

Enri shouted the words that popped into her blank head as they came. “S-sorry! I got some cow poop on my hand! It’s everywhere! I need to go wash it off!”

“H-hey!”

Enri watched Jugemu and the others running away as fast as their legs would carry them. She wondered anxiously how long she would be able to stall.

Barbro was already aggravated to the breaking point. He glared at the knight who returned not as his ally but as a hated enemy.

“Say that again! What?!” Fury hissed between Barbro’s clenched teeth, and he practically spat the words one by one.

The knight repeated himself coolly. “Sir. There is still no sign of Carne’s gate opening.”

Barbro wanted to take a fist to the man’s calm profile.

But that would be foolish. He desperately tried to will the anger pooling in his hand to disperse.

None of these people, including the knight, were loyal to Barbro personally. He didn’t have his own soldiers. These soldiers were with him because their masters ordered them to be or because their masters were also accompanying him. As such, he couldn’t very well hit a knight while several others were watching.

“...Why not? Why don’t those peasants open their gate? This land is in the royal family’s domain, so they should be obligated to obey me. And I am ordering them to open the gate!” As his irritation mounted, his speech grew sloppy. “I don’t understand! Are they making fun of me?! What are they thinking?”

To the eldest prince, Barbro, the people of this village were beings far below him.

Even they’re slighting me.

The moment he thought that, months of pent-up anger flooded out as if it had found a place to go. The root of the complex sentiments was the demon disturbance—so unpleasant for Barbro.

The dam broke quickly.

“This is treason! I say this village is treasonous!”

A ripple of commotion went through everyone within earshot.

“Wait! That’s a bit—!”

Barbro glared at the bewildered knight in displeasure.

If an entire village was declared treasonous, eliminating all the residents was standard practice. After that, the village would be

burned down to completely erase it.

But was that really all right in this case?

Barbro didn't understand why his subordinates weren't obeying his order. Did the marquis's soldiers also make light of him? Was that why they weren't complying?

"What do you mean by that?! Leaving these people alive when they don't follow the royal family's orders is surely worse!"

If Barbro forgave people who rebelled against the royal family, he would be seen as weak. Letting them live would lead to a loss in his authority.

If peasants openly rebelled in the territory ruled by a noble, that noble would undoubtedly destroy them. The knights who served the marquis knew that.

"Wait! The war with the empire is about to begin! If you kill people on the king's land now, it will affect the entire army's morale! And look how well defended this place is! It can't be a mere village. There can't be that many residents, but I'm sure we would be in for a struggle if we attempted to open the gate by force. The best course of action would be to calmly ask why they aren't opening it."

"...We'll go in friendly and then hang a bunch of them later."

"...Well, I'm sure that can't be helped. Your Highness ordered them to open the gate, and they refused."

"Yes, I'll hang them from the gate. As an example."

"Very good, Your Highness."

Barbro scowled at Carne.

As the knight said, it even had a fine wall in addition to the gate. Perhaps those defenses were a matter of course, so close to the Tove Woodlands, but with the watchtower, it looked more like a fortress than a frontier village.

Certainly, bringing it down would take time.

He had over a thousand soldiers in position before the gate and was shouting to open up.

If he listened, he could hear a similar voice from a distance. It was coming from the rear gate.

As if struck with a flint, Barbro's emotions burst into muddy flames again. Reason went out the window.

"Hey! Flaming arrows—now!"

"F-flaming arrows, Your Highness?!"

"Yes. Who knows how long this will take if we keep waiting? Look, we don't have time to bother with this village. If you can open the gate in a few minutes, that's fine, but that's impossible, right?!"

The knights bit their lips and nodded.

"Threaten them with flaming arrows. No more shouting back and forth over the wall like children. Let's show them how adults do

things!”

The knights were lost for words, and a man slipped past them to come to the front.

“If you won’t follow His Highness’s orders...can you even say you’re loyal to the marquis? Your Highness, if it pleases you, my men are at your service.”

It was Baron Nosmartz with his crew of brownnosers.

Barbro was genuinely impressed that even this idiot could come in handy. Well, they were nobles, too, and would surely do something like this if there was a village in their domain that went against them; maybe they understood how Barbro felt very well.

“...Oh? Then I order you, Baron. Fire flaming arrows on the village—no, hmm. On the watchtower. No one will die if we do that, right?”

“Ohh, how considerate, Your Highness! I would expect nothing less. Please observe as we carry out your will.”

“M’lady! We’re all ready! Everyone’s hidden. All that’s left is for me to— What’s wrong?” Sensing the unusual atmosphere, Jugemu wasn’t sure how to continue.

The members of the self-defense squad who had remained were in complete opposition. Some were passively accepting of opening the gate and receiving the army, while others were aggressively against it. The root of the disagreement was whether or not it would constitute a betrayal of the village’s hero, Ainz Ooal Gown. That’s why it was such a difficult call.

“Actually...”

Just as Enri was about to explain to Jugemu, a voice sounded from the other side of the wall.

“People of Carne. It is very suspicious of you as subjects of the kingdom to refuse to open the gate. We will take representatives to the battlefield, where they must petition Ainz Ooal Gown to surrender. Prove that your loyalty lies with the kingdom and that you are the king’s subjects.”

The mood changed: Hatred seemed to rock the atmosphere.

Enri was no exception.

They were subjects of the kingdom, and they were loyal. But the weight of those facts, compared to their gratitude to the person who had saved their village expecting nothing in return, was so light. The one who had rescued them when their families, friends, and loved ones were being murdered was that great caster.

“I have no interest in being taken to the battlefield only to get in his way!”

“Why don’t we just escape into the forest and worry about the rest later?”

The villagers were in an uproar.

But they agreed that they would choose a plan that didn’t hamper their hero.

Just then came the sound of several things being smashed. Next was the whistling of arrows slicing through the air. Trailing red, they rained down on the watchtower. Enri could hear the dry thunking as they stuck into the wood.

“No...”

Enri gasped at the realization that the kingdom had introduced into this argument weapons that could kill people.

Luckily, there wasn’t anyone in the watchtower at the moment. *Is that why they attacked it? Or...*

...would they have done it even if there were people inside?

“L-lady Enri! They don’t seem to be aiming over here, but it’s probably better for ya to stay out of range. Come this way! Hurry!”

Enri had been standing stock-still taking in the scene, but Jugemu pulled her arm. With no will to resist, she followed him, but she didn’t turn away from the watchtower.

As the self-defense squad members withdrew, the watchtower burst into flames.

The roof was made mostly of straw, so it burned up immediately. As she watched, the ceiling collapsed into giant flames.

The destruction could be seen from anywhere in the village. Heartrending cries went up here and there, but one was louder than all the rest. Breathing in short, rapid breaths due to the shock, Enri looked at the one who had emitted the most sorrowful scream.

It was a man who had moved to the village.

His face was equal parts hatred and despair. Looking at those around him who shared his expression, she realized they were all transplants.

Enri remembered—that their villages had been burned down.

“It’s an enemy!” the man yelled. “They’re our enemy! If they weren’t, they wouldn’t do something like that! I’m going to fight!”

“The kingdom? Ha. Those good-for-nothings never helped us! Are you going to burn this village down, too?” shouted a plump woman.

“Are we going to let them get away with this? If they’re gonna kill us, let them! We’ll take as many of them with us as we can! This will be our revenge!” a young man spat.

With the loosing of the flaming arrows, a nearly insane hatred took over the crowd.

“...Lady Enri, ya should call for a vote.” Jugemu made the levelheaded suggestion with the steely face of a warrior.

“Huh...? Those people aren’t in their right minds. We should vote once everyone calms down a bit...”

“There’s no time. And there’s nothing that says our opponents won’t go on a rampage. The village should decide what to do.”

He was right. They had already shot flaming arrows at the watchtower. Their next attack would surely be worse. They didn’t have a second to lose.

Having made up her mind, Enri took a deep breath. When she glanced at Nfirea, who had brought Nemu over, he gave her a little nod as if to say, *You can do this*.

Enri felt a slight warmth in her chest.

That gave her the last bit of courage she needed.

“Everyone! We’re going to make the decision for the village with everyone here! Once we reach a decision, please follow it!”

Energetic voices replied in approval.

“Does anyone think the village should go along with the kingdom’s suggestion?”

No one raised their hand.

As her heart pounded, Enri shouted, “Then we’ll risk our lives to oppose it! Raise your hand if you want to fight against the kingdom!”

With a roar, so many hands flew into the air that there were too many to count. And none of them had simply raised their hands. All were tightly balled fists. The villagers’ faces were determined.

Certainly, there was fear. Of course there was. They had chosen the path that ensured their deaths. But there was something else affecting them more deeply.

They didn’t want to be the type of people who repaid all the kindness they had received with ingratitude.

“Then we fight! This is our fight! We’ll repay that kindness! Jugemu, please come up with our battle plan.”

Jugemu moved quickly to the front and stood next to Enri. “We’ve seen your determination. Y’all are gonna die here, ya know. Is that all right?”

The only response to the seasoned veteran’s words was yes.

“You lot have a lotta bark for how pale yer faces are. You’re all magnificent... Now, I don’t mean to dampen the enthusiasm, but don’t ya think we should have the young ones escape? Shouldn’t the only ones to die be us and the older men?”

One of the older villagers spoke. “That’s a good point, but...it’s futile, isn’t it? The enemy is waiting outside both gates. Even if the children climbed over the wall, they’d definitely be discovered.”

“Yeah, if they ran the normal way, things would go right as ya

said.” Jugemu grinned. “They wouldn’t be able to run and stay hidden. That’s why first we’ll open the front gate and draw in the enemy. Once they’ve lowered their guard, that’s when we strike. If we can do enough damage, they should concentrate their forces.” He looked around at everyone. “Of course, they might also realize it’s a distraction. Even so, if our attack is strong enough, they’ll have no choice but to gather together. Any questions or concerns?”

“Doesn’t seem like it, but Jugemu, where should they run to?”

“That’s obvious, m’lady. Into the Tove Woodlands. We’ll have Arg and Lady Brita, with their knowledge of the forest, go along with the evacuees, so I’m sure they’ll be able to manage until these guys leave.”

The villagers were prepared to give their lives, but it was only natural that they didn’t want their children to be killed. When Jugemu realized their fighting spirit had slackened with the relief of a lower possibility of losing the young ones, he said with a grim expression, “Listen. We need to land the first strike, then focus on attacking and defending after they concentrate their forces. We can’t let them get a breather in between. The more powerful our attacks are, the more likely the ones who run get to survive.”

“Ha-ha-ha-ha! Phew, what a relief!”

Several people were laughing. It wasn’t due to despair or a lapse in sanity. It was refreshing laughter.

“If my wife and children are saved, then I have no regrets. I’m happy to pay back our debt to Ainz Ooal Gown!”

“You said it! I won’t be a pathetic dad!”

“So...how will we split up?”

In response to Nfirea’s question, Jugemu scanned the faces of all the villagers present. “I’d like ya and Lady Enri to protect the wives and children as they withdraw from the village. And then like I said before, with woodland life in mind, Lady Brita and Arg and his tribe will be there.”

“—What?” Enri was so surprised she yelped audibly.

It was her duty as head of the village to operate with everyone until the end. Having decided to send the villagers into a deadly battle, it was her duty to go with them. She tried to say those things, but the villagers piped up faster.

They all agreed with Jugemu. As she was thinking about how to convince them otherwise, they decided the plan without her.

“Enri, we’re counting on you.”

“Please look after my kids. My wife was killed...but I still have my kids...”

The villagers’ firm handshakes contained all sorts of emotions. Enri was moved nearly to tears by the time Nfirea stepped beside her.

“Enri, let’s go. Our battle will take place after we survive. It’s a

battle we can't lose. And maybe Ainz Ooal Gown will come to save us again. Since we've been to his castle before, it would be best for us to be around if he does."

"That's right!"

"Oh, Jugemu..."

"That horn ya used to summon us...there was— Ah, well, even if ya used it, it would only be a drop in the bucket. Instead, put the new goblins to work after this battle."

Almost crying, Enri pressed her hands against her eyes.

"Understood! We'll take good care of your wives and children, everyone! Let's go, Nfi!"

The gate slowly swung open.

"Aha, we should have shot the flaming arrows first thing. Readyng the follow-up volley was a waste, but..."

Barbro frowned in displeasure. They had used up too much precious time they didn't have. It would be quite the forced march to make it up later, but there was nothing to be done about that now.

This was the mistake of the marquise's men. If he hadn't given the order to loose the flaming arrows, he couldn't even imagine how much more time they would have wasted.

He looked to the heavens, cursing his poor luck to have to manage such foolish subordinates.

They would also need some time for...executing some villagers.

He would hang them from the walls as examples of how foolish it was to disobey the royal family.

Then they would need time to find someone who knew Ainz Ooal Gown well. That seemed like it would take longer than the executions, because it would have to begin with an interrogation.

"Shit. How was I supposed to know I would need a torturer? I guess I could tell them I promise to spare them... The problem is the children..."

There was no point in letting the young live. In the first place, a child would never be able to survive on its own, so hanging it with its parents would be the compassionate thing to do.

"Do we even have that much rope? It would be nice if the numbers worked out..."

The soldiers approached the gate. He was incredibly satisfied with the sight of the royal family's flag advancing at the head of the line. He wanted the flag bearer in his honor guard once he was king.

The soldier holding the banner passed through the gate first...and went flying backward as if repelled by something.

The royal family's flag fluttered through the air before landing on

the ground.

From within the gate, a huge figure showed itself.

“Th-that’s an ogre, right? An ogre?!” Barbro cried stupidly, forgetting the royal family’s dignity in the confusion of a situation he never anticipated.

Yes, it was an ogre, a people-eating subhuman. Multiple soldiers just as bewildered as Barbro at the sudden appearance of the monster were batted away with its gigantic club. When they fell to the ground, after flying quite a distance in a scattering of flesh scraps, it was like a sign, and the other soldiers scrambled to be the first to escape the area in front of the gate. More ogres exited and ran after them.

The soldiers who had taken off in the humiliating rout were clobbered away with clubs. They were like dolls being sent flying by children.

Their retreat was too sloppy to be called a withdrawal, probably because it was the baron’s troops. They never thought their reward of being the first to enter the village after firing the flaming arrows would end up like this.

Just as Barbro raised his eyebrows at the sight of the baron abandoning his territory’s soldiers and skedaddling out of harm’s way himself, a high-pitched whistle sounded.

The marquis’s cavalry had all raised their lances. Their magnificent discipline was enough to make Barbro think, *Now that’s more like it*. But they couldn’t jump into the melee of the ogres chasing the fleeing soldiers.

A lance was most destructive during the charge. Its advantages were essentially neutralized in a melee.

“Why aren’t you firing?” Barbro screamed.

Damages would mount if they continued to let their opponents close in. The best move would be to forsake the soldiers fleeing toward them and shoot them along with the villagers.

As Barbro was getting irritated, the ogres began to retreat. The cavalry couldn’t follow them to attack, ostensibly because the retreating soldiers were in the way, so they allowed the ogres to reenter the gate.

Barbro clenched the reins of his horse as he watched the men take in the soldiers who had returned and were working to build an actual battle formation.

He wanted to finish this stupid mission as quickly as possible and go make a name for himself on the battlefield against the empire.

From that dream resulted this mess.

He was sure that if he went helplessly back to E-Rantel, despite the unforeseen ogres, his reputation would suffer further. Then the gap in the race for the throne between him and his younger brother,

Zanac, who should have been an extra, would be decisive.

Or...is this all going according to plan?

The loud tongue click he couldn't hold back practically echoed, and he knew the nobles nearby were watching him.

But he didn't have time to try to gloss it over. Barbro's sharp gaze was directed at the knight who commanded the marquis's elite forces, who was running his way.

"...What is that? Has the village been taken over by ogres?! Do you know anything about this?"

"N-not a thing, Your Highness. If monsters were here... The tax collector was just here, and I'm sure he would have reported it if the village had been conquered by ogres. And if he hadn't returned, that would have been an issue, too... What in the world is going on in this village...?"

Barbro sensed the knight was genuinely at a loss, so even if this was a trap to reduce his power further, he realized this man had not been informed about it.

So in one way, he was an ally.

"So we don't have enough information. Well, that can't be helped. There were five ogres. If there were any more, surely they would have attacked, so there can't be double that amount. Five ogres. You can take them out, right?"

"Of course, Your Highness. Each of us boasts strength equal to the elites in the Royal Select, who are said to be the strongest in the kingdom. Five ogres are no match for us!"

"I don't doubt you, but I do wonder something. As far as I know, ogres are not very intelligent monsters; their actions earlier seemed too clever. They lured us in by opening the gate and then attacked with perfect timing. There has to be a commander. If one of the villagers is controlling them...?"

"With all due respect, that's not possible. How would a mere farmer tame ogres? But there is the prospect of someone else. If possible, I'd like to gather intelligence about who we're up against an
—"

Barbro couldn't contain his aggravation. "How can you just chitchat like that? Look!" He pointed to the royal family's flag lying on the ground in front of the gate like a tattered rag. "Look what they've done to the royal family's flag! I don't care what it takes; we must destroy this village! Gather the soldiers. Loose your flaming arrows and burn it to the ground. This is a chance to get some siege experience! We're past the point of getting through this without any casualties. Attack like you mean to raze the place."

"Wait! Perhaps it's not a villager but a subhuman with a brain, like an ogre sorcerer!"

“Maybe, but what about it?” Barbro spoke slowly to the puzzled knight, as if he was explaining to a child. “Listen. It doesn’t matter if it’s the villagers controlling the ogres or a smarter monster controlling the villagers and the ogres. The people in this village have rebelled against the royal family, the rulers of this land. We need to show the world how foolish that was.”

“It’s possible the villagers have been taken hostage and are innocent!”

“Were you not listening? What did I say? It doesn’t matter!”

The knight seemed to be having difficulties accepting his point, so Barbro shrugged.

“Okay, okay. I understand how you feel. Then here is the best compromise. Capture unresisting villagers. We can judge them later. Will that work for you?”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

The knight bowed. Barbro nodded in satisfaction at the spirited reply.

“But I have one condition: Overwhelmingly crush them. If I lose men here, I’ll never hear the end of it. That goes for you as well. People will say you warriors are supposed to be the marquis’s trump card, but you couldn’t even run an errand to a village in a satisfactory way.”

“But the ogres—”

“An excuse like that isn’t going to fly. That’s just how the world is.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“If you understand, then get it done. Gather up the soldiers around the rear gate, too. And go cut down a tree from the forest. Make a simple battering ram. I’ll leave the details of the operation up to you. Win the fight while keeping losses to a minimum. Kill anyone who runs.”

Pots of oil were thrown against the wall, and more flaming arrows were loosed.

There was a violent explosion as if someone had cast Fireball, and as the black smoke rose, bright-red flames raged.

The self-defense squad members were shaken, so Jugemu gripped his magic sword tightly and roared. “Don’t get scared! This fire isn’t enough to bring down these walls! It’s more important to guard the gate —”

A huge bang rang out, and the gate creaked.

Just as the frame of the watchtower was still standing, the thick logs of the walls wouldn’t burn up even with the volleys of flaming

arrows. Apparently, his idea that the fire had been only a distraction while they broke through the gate was right on. It shook with another bang.

This echo was heavier than the punches an ogre could deliver, so it had to be a siege weapon—probably a battering ram.

“Loose your arrows!”

Following Jugemu’s shout, the villagers shot their arrows with practiced hands. Screams of pain went up from the other side of the wall, but the battering ram attacks didn’t stop. Maybe it was a wave attack of multiple battering rams.

“Loose!”

Timed with Jugemu’s voice, another volley of arrows flew. But this time, the other side shot back. Several times the number of their arrows returned as a rain.

But not one of them hit anybody.

Their opponents weren’t inferring the firing locations; their arrows were sticking out of places that totally missed the mark. Still, if that many archers continued firing, their hit ratio would gradually improve. That meant there would be trouble if they didn’t immediately reduce their ratio to zero again.

“Take shelter! Take shelter! We’re switching positions!”

Following the order that was the product of Jugemu skillfully both raising and lowering his voice at the same time, the villagers began to shift in a panic.

The only thing the villagers had been taught was how to drop arrows on the other side of the wall by aiming from a specific location. For that reason, their hit ratio from that position was high—but conversely, just switching positions meant that they would have trouble aiming where they wanted.

A shooting battle wouldn’t work anymore.

“Take up your spears! We’ll do the rest at close quarters!”

The *thock* of metal striking something behind the wall was different than the sound of the battering ram they’d been hearing up until now. They must have brought out axes. The sounds could be heard from more than one location.

Numbers truly were violence. There was a good chance the attacks on the walls and gate were distractions, and soldiers were climbing up ladders somewhere else entirely. That was the tactic Jugemu would have chosen if he was commanding.

As I thought...their tactic of splitting their forces is working quite well.

Since Carne was overwhelmingly outnumbered, they couldn’t possibly cope with all the different attacks. By making them think that, they spread them out even further.

After they had thinned out enough, the village would strike. In

wedge formation, they would charge on the army's main position. If they did that, the soldiers would probably panic and concentrate their forces.

That's why he had had the ogres come back in. Even if they had charged at that point, they probably couldn't have caused enough chaos to get them to bring back the soldiers who had gone around to the rear gate.

If the detached enemies come back, that'll mean we'll be surrounded with nowhere to run. I guess it'll be what ya call jumping into the dragon's mouth.

They were tactics that were sure to leave them dead.

That said...

"Well, our plan is already half-successful," Jugemu murmured in a relaxed tone as he turned his gaze toward the rear gate, though he couldn't see it.

He'd prepared the escape route with the highest-possible chances of survival for his master, so he had no regrets. To make a cold assessment, if all the villagers fighting here died, the enemy wouldn't know how many got away, nor what became of Enri.

Protecting Enri was Jugemu's highest priority; for that, he was willing to sacrifice everything, which was why—

"Everyone! When the gate breaks, we're going to charge! Our objective is their main position! Taking out their boss is the only way we'll survive!"

"Rrrragh!" A determined roar went up. Some voices trembled, but he didn't sense anyone chickening out.

They were men with the will to protect their children and loved ones as much as they could.

Enri and Nfirea dashed down from the rear watchtower and ran to where the women and children were gathered by the gate. Nfirea's grandmother, Lizzy, wasn't among them. She was busy hiding the many alchemical items Ainz Ooal Gown had given her.

She probably wouldn't have time to escape, but she undertook the task with that understanding.

"It's okay! We didn't see anyone in the area. Let's open the gate and head for the forest!"

The group of children were so frightened their faces were pale, but they nodded seriously.

As Nfirea and Brita turned the crank, one side of the gate began to open.

First, Enri poked her head out the slim opening to survey the area. There was no mistake. Just as they had seen from the watchtower,

there was no sign of any soldiers. Jugemu's strategy must have worked.

"Okay, go!"

The first ones to leave were Arg and the goblins from his tribe. Their role was to cut an escape route for them if there were soldiers waiting for them in the woods. Next went Brita. She was on the lookout for any soldiers Arg and the others might miss.

Out of consideration for the feet of the children behind them, the vanguard adjusted their speed as they ran toward the trees. After that, the children took off running with a buddy. Some mothers ran with their children in their arms. Children without mothers grabbed the hand of any older child.

Bringing up the rear, Enri and Nfirea glanced at each other and then ran.

After exiting the gate, it was a long way to the forest. And it seemed several times farther away than usual.

They frantically pumped their legs.

Still so far.

Still.

Just then, they heard a horse neigh behind them.

Enri's cardiopulmonary function during this period was shockingly good—to the point where it kind of grossed her out. Even so, her heart jolted and her breath grew rough. Terrified, she turned around and saw something she didn't want to believe. She saw despair.

"No way..."

Over a hundred mounted knights had appeared behind them. They must have been lurking in the watchtower's blind spot, pressed up against the wall. If they were showing themselves at this point, it was probably because they had determined that, since no one else was running out, those two were the last of the escapees.

It wasn't that far from the village to the forest, but humans and horses moved at different speeds.

Even if Arg and Brita could get away, it would be impossible for the children. The horses would definitely catch up to them.

The knights were raising things that gleamed, so she had no doubt they meant to cut them down from behind. She cringed with the fear of the time before. Nemu was running toward the front. *Will she make it?*

"Enri, keep running!"

Nfirea stopped.

"Nfi!"

"I'll buy you time!"

"Don't be ridiculous! I don't think Lupusregina is going to come out of nowhere to save you at the last minute like last time!"

“I said to run!” Enri had stopped, and he screamed at her.

“If you want to buy time, I have a better way than you.”

Enri took out a shabby-looking horn.

It would summon nineteen goblins. Still, each one was strong, so they would be sure to buy them time.

“You dummy, look how many of them there are! What’re twenty-odd goblins going to do?”

Nfirea was right. They would just go around them and continue their attack. But it would be dumber to not blow it.

“That goes for you, too!”

Enri didn’t have any more time to talk. She put the horn to her lips, ready to blow.

Save us, goblin friends!

It was a bass sound that thundered out, shaking the ground.

Enri blinked, hardly believing she had produced it. When she summoned Jugemu and the others, it had made a sort of pathetic *pooooot* like a kid’s toy.

“E-Enri...”

She noticed that Nfirea’s alarm stemmed from something he was looking at past her, farther back. She turned to follow his gaze.

She shouldn’t have had time to while the cavalry was charging at them, but for some reason, the knights had jerked their reins and come to a stop. Perhaps because it was so sudden, the horses were rearing up.

Enri looked behind her.

“...What...? Huh?!”

•

In *Yggdrasil*, players were able to name their own items save for a few exceptions. One of them was artifacts, which were dropped as completed items.

The artifact Goblin General’s Horn...

It was a small, shabby-looking item, so there was one question.

This item summoned nineteen goblins in all. But the goblins it summoned were, to *Yggdrasil* players, mobs so weak that they were practically useless. So why did an item like that get such a grand name with “General” in it? Why not just call it “Goblin Troops’ Horn”?

Many *Yggdrasil* players wondered the same thing. But no one ever came up with a satisfactory explanation; everyone had just kind of accepted that it was a strange name.

But actually, there was a reason for it.

And the reason was...

Jugemu swung the magic great sword he'd taken from the Giant of the East. He put all his might behind the blow, but an enemy soldier blocked it. It seemed he couldn't halt its momentum entirely, though, because his stance broke momentarily. Normally that would be when Jugemu would launch a follow-up attack, but the soldiers surrounding him didn't allow that.

They came at him from either side, well synchronized to cover the first soldier's weak spot.

With a click of his tongue, Jugemu swung his great sword like it was part of his body to repel both attacks.

"...This goblin is magnificent. I can't believe he's holding the three of us off this well."

"He's quite a fighter. I never thought I'd meet a goblin this strong."

Jugemu noted the composure in their impressed voices, which irritated him.

If it was Jugemu against one of the soldiers, he would win. Against two, it would depend on the enemy. Against three, he was very likely to lose. And—

Sensing another soldier trying to come around behind him, he inched backward.

—against four, he had no chance.

At first, it had been easy to break through—all the soldiers were weak.

The wedge formation of Carne's heroes sliced through the kingdom's formation and dug deep into it. But like the layers of rocks in the ground, stronger men had appeared. Their gear was much better, and they seemed to be the enemy's elite forces.

It wasn't that far to where the enemy's commander stood, and it didn't seem that densely defended.

But—their opponents were tough.

Without taking his eyes completely off the four soldiers he was fighting, he looked around and saw that his subordinate goblins were outnumbered.

The ogres were in the same boat; they had powerful arms and great stamina but not much else. Soldiers specialized in hit-and-run tactics ran circles around them.

Carne had already lost several residents. Though the goblins were the front line of the wedge formation's frame, their enemies were so numerous they couldn't hold them all back, and each time they managed to make inroads, someone hit the ground.

It was an impossible battle from the beginning, so these results

were only natural.

But it was true that Jugemu wondered if maybe...

That's when it happened.

He couldn't completely block the sword that swung down and took a scratch.

"Tch!" He brandished his great sword and created some distance. "Who are ya? Definitely not just militia, that's for sure."

Jugemu was level 12. With that in mind, his opponent's level must have been 10 or 11. The other three were 8 or maybe 9.

A typical villager was level 1. The people who had trained in Carne might have made it to level 2. Even the soldiers who accompanied the tax collector from E-Rantel seemed like level 3 or below, so these soldiers were quite strong.

Incidentally, Nfirea and Enri weren't warriors, so he couldn't say for sure, but they seemed strong, so he counted them as exceptions.

"This goblin...or is he a hobgoblin? Well, I guess it makes sense since there are so many?"

"He doesn't look like a hobgoblin... Maybe he's goblin royalty? Maybe he took the village by force...? But that doesn't explain why the people are putting up such a desperate fight."

"Ha! Humans aren't very smart! It's because we've taken them hostage. Can't ya figure even that much out?"

"That's definitely a lie. Villagers like that can't fight to this level. They'd be more likely to stab you in the back. I sense battlefield bonds that transcend race from you guys. But why? Why are goblins and humans fighting side by side?"

"How should I know, dimwit?!"

"Looks like I was right that you're on the same side. If you weren't —"

"Shaddup! That satisfied smirk on yer face is pissin' me off!"

Jugemu brought his sword down.

But the outcome was the same as before.

The soldier could block the blow, but he couldn't halt its momentum completely. His stance broke, but when Jugemu tried to perform a follow-up, the others all aimed at his weak points to intercept.

In that case... Having made up his mind, Jugemu didn't dodge the swords.

The blades aimed at unarmored parts of his body sliced into him.

The sensation in those two places was less like pain and more like heat.

Jugemu gritted his teeth, used a skill, and shifted his great sword's attention to the soldier coming to slash at him from the side.

"Goblin Blow!"

He unleashed a powerful attack aimed at the soldier's mail—a weak point. It cut through the armor and left a large wound in the man's flesh. The moment he was hit, the soldier spasmed.

The great sword had poison magic, though the man seemed to be resisting it, albeit not perfectly. His ability to fight hadn't been completely eviscerated.

But then: It wasn't as if Jugemu was distracted, but he failed to dodge a strike from behind.

The breastplate he was wearing protected him, so he wasn't seriously injured, but the impact of the sword made his whole body shriek.

"Shit!"

"That's my line. How dare you do that to Vike?"

"Vike, fall back. Go around behind him!"

This was a melee, so Jugemu dispatched other soldiers who entered his range, as well. Their shabby gear meant they were probably peasant conscripts.

The sheer numbers they had were really unfair.

"Fall back! These guys—these goblins—are seriously tough! Fall back! We'll handle this guy. Go to the villagers in the rear!"

"I don't think so!"

Jugemu whipped his sword around, and the peasant soldiers backed up, frightened.

The heat turned into a throbbing pain.

Aside from swinging a sword, one of the most important things a warrior trained in was the ability to get used to pain. And another was to gain an understanding of one's pain threshold—so that it was possible to run when things felt bad.

Jugemu's senses told him he could still fight. But only that he could still fight. How many more minutes would he be able to stall them?

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw another villager collapse. The earth soaked up his blood.

They hadn't had much of a chance to begin with, but now they were doomed.

That said, he figured they had bought Enri and the others enough time to escape, so all that was left for him to do was lurch forward toward death.

Our objective is the enemy boss.

I'll go even if I have to go alone.

Did they see his determination? The expressions of the soldiers in front of him hardened.

Just as Jugemu clenched his sword and resolved to charge, a commotion went through the entire battlefield. When he glanced in

the direction his opponents were looking, he couldn't look away again.

It had appeared next to the village...

•

...quite simple. Its true power wasn't to summon nineteen goblins.

In *Yggdrasil*, no one had managed to put its actual value on display, so it had been discarded as a junk item.

In this other world, however, it unleashed its true power for the first time.

Its name, once more, was...

Goblin General's Horn.

Its real power, if used when three conditions were met, was...

3

The heavy, rhythmic sound of a drum echoed across the battlefield from next to Carne. The eyes that gathered in the direction of the noise popped wide open immediately—because an army of about five thousand strong was advancing to the beat of the drum with orderly motions.

Both Prince Barbro's side and Carne's side first assumed it was reinforcements for the kingdom's forces. The only difference was whether they could think of someone who would send Prince Barbro reinforcements out here or not. But the way the newcomers looked made it immediately clear they weren't kingdom reinforcements.

The army was made up of goblins.

The race of subhumans called goblins was smaller than humans, only about the size of children, but their determination made them seem double or triple their actual size.

They were wrapped in the sparkle of steel. Their weapons, made for maiming and killing, were polished to perfection. They were the weapons of warriors.

This wasn't a militia but an army of true warriors.

"Now! Anyone still alive, run for it! It's reinforcements! We have reinforcements! Run that way!" Jugemu barked loudly.

He didn't know who they were. They could have been friend, foe,

or someone totally uninvolved. Running over to them just because they were of the same race was the wrong choice. Really, they probably should have fled back to the village.

But Jugemu sensed something like sympathy. He had a hunch they honored the same master. He had the feeling they would shelter them and protect them.

The Carne survivors didn't hesitate to run for the great goblin army.

The encirclement crumbled as they ran. The kingdom's soldiers knew they should be pursuing the runners, but their movements were sluggish. But that was only to be expected. The huge army that appeared was so well disciplined. Approaching carelessly had to be dangerous.

There were two reasons the kingdom's army let Jugemu and his men go.

The first was that if they passed on the chance for a follow-up attack, it would let them reorganize their formation. The drums were already telling them to fall back.

The other was that they worried if they killed any goblins, the great army would unleash fierce and immediate retribution to avenge their kin.

The new goblins readily accepted Jugemu and his men, loosening their formation to allow them to slip inside. The moment the last ally had been welcomed, they closed their ranks and returned to their original positions—like a steel door.

Jugemu looked over his friends as they lay on the ground, dead tired. No one had made it unharmed. Many of them were so relieved to reach safety that they fell unconscious.

As he scanned the area, his vision seemed like it might begin to blur. The number of goblins, ogres, and villagers had decreased.

"But I guess we're lucky that over half survived. Konaa!"

He called the name of the only goblin in their group who could use healing magic, the cleric. But Konaa shook his head. He had already used up all his mana in the fight.

"Then what about first aid? Can anyone—?"

Midway through Jugemu's shout, he saw a bearded goblin wearing a Chinese headdress and carrying a fan made of feathers approaching.

From his demeanor, he was clearly the core figure of this army.

"Ho-ho-ho-ho. You are General Enri's escort, I take it? I have been entrusted with command of this army. I am a goblin strategist. Now that we have come, no one will do you harm. Never fear. We'll take them to the healing corps right away."

The goblin raised his fan and a robust group of goblins arrived

bearing stretchers.

“Quickly now, load them up and carry them over. Since we’re here now, the loss of even one life would be a disgrace.” The injured were carried away. “You are also wounded. I think it would be best for you to get treatment from our—”

“Uh, sorry. That’s very kind of ya, but can we talk first? I’ll last that long.”

The strategist must have believed that Jugemu’s attitude wasn’t just bravado, because he nodded once and replied, “I would expect nothing less from the leader of General Enri’s escort. What would you like to ask? Well, ho-ho-ho, I imagine there is only one question on your mind. If you’re looking for General Enri, she’s in the screened position behind me. I’m sure she will be pleased to see you.”

“Oh? That’s good.” He heaved a genuinely relieved sigh. So much tension went out of his body that he felt like he might fall over, but he didn’t want to look so pathetic in front of their successors. “All right. Then I suppose I’ll go see her. It doesn’t seem like we’ll have much of a role to play in the battle to come anyhow.”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho. I appreciate you yielding the action to us newcomers.”

“What? Ah, it’s fine. The seniors’ duty is to give their juniors a chance to earn some achievements, after all... Thank you.”

“Ho-ho-ho-ho. We’ll be sure to show you what we can do. Now, then! Our only option is victory. Instruct the heavy infantry to advance!”

“What’s that?! We nearly had them! Shit!”

Barbro’s eyes practically popped out of his head as he glared at the intruders who had obliterated his efforts.

Nothing was going his way. *Why do I have to face a goblin army in this tiny village?* It was so aggravating he wanted to rip his hair out.

If it was an imperial army, he would have happily ordered his men to continue fighting. But these were goblins. Even if they won, who would care?

“Prince, requesting permission to withdraw.”

He turned scornful eyes on the knight and his suggestion.

The reasonable thing to do was withdraw. He didn’t know why such a large goblin army had appeared in this place, but if he reported back with that information, it would probably be counted as a job decently done.

But it wasn’t hard to imagine that if he turned tail and ran without clashing swords at least once, he would be branded as the prince who fled from goblins.

And if he was defeated, he would be the prince who lost to

goblins. The nobles were so hungry for gossip that the rumors would spread until everyone had heard them. Anyone who didn't see the battle wouldn't care how strong the goblins were. All that mattered to them was if the story was interesting or not.

Barbro mentally cursed the aristocrats ridiculing him from their positions of safety.

“...Permission denied. Fight them.”

“Your Highness! Look at their equipment and their impeccable formation. They're as skilled or even more so than the goblins we've fought so far. Our chances of winning with an army made up of mainly civilians are low. Please order a withdrawal!”

Barbro knew that without being told. But he had no other way to protect his reputation besides fighting. Now they could only pray the goblins weren't as tough as they looked.

“You fool! Do I really have to spell out how dangerous it would be to leave this army here? The kingdom's army is headed for the Katze Plain as we speak. What would you do if E-Rantel was attacked while it's practically empty?!”

“U-understood.”

All they could do was hit them once and withdraw immediately after that if the army was as powerful as it seemed. Their aim was to fight the empire, not suffer a major loss here. He maintained enough composure to keep that in mind.

The soldiers ahead of Barbro tidied their ranks, and almost as if on cue, the goblin army began advancing.

The enemy was in three long columns.

And against them, Barbro's men were in an inverted wedge. The reason they weren't in a wedge was that they wanted to make the best use of the cavalry, with their superior combat strength, and because their enemy's formation was weak against flank attacks.

At the front of the goblin army, facing them, were heavy infantry carrying giant shields that practically hid them. The pressure of their perfectly synchronized march felt more to Barbro like a wall pressing in on him.

Inside his gauntlets, his hands gripping the reins of his horse started to get grossly clammy.

The militiamen with their spears crashed into the heavy infantry and their shields. First, these forces would put a halt to their advance and pin them down, then the idea was to have the cavalry charge their flank.

The militia and the heavy infantry clashed.

And a goblin shout reached Barbro.

“We are the Goblin Heavy Infantry Corps under General Enri!

Don't think this will be enough to stop us!"

Before he could wonder about who General Enri was, Barbro was distracted by groaning movements coming from his formation.

The enemy shields were shoving the conscripts back. Naturally, those who were pushed bumped into the men behind them, and the formation began to crumble.

Alarmed, the cavalry units on either flank leaped into motion. The right moved a little faster and tried to swing around to attack from the side, but seventeen riders sparkling in silver armor atop not horses but shining silver wolves rode out to meet them.

"We are the Goblin Holy Knight Unit under General Enri. Our loyalty lies with her!"

From the left flank sprang magical beasts similar to wolves. On their backs were goblins. The wolf leading the pack had wings. The goblin astride it shouted, and its voice sliced through the conscripts' screams to make it to Barbro's ears.

"We are the Mounted Goblin Corps under General Enri. Here we come!"

As the riders entered the fray, Barbro heard the twangs of a great many bowstrings.

When he looked, he saw dozens of arrows raining down on the melee. He focused on the enemy side to find where they were coming from.

In the second formation. Goblins in eye-poppingly red clothes held large bows. Their physiques were strikingly unbalanced, and their bodies swayed with each step. An eye-catching goblin holding a bow even larger than the others opened its mouth wide.

"We are the Goblin Longbow Corps! Know that you cannot escape us."

And that wasn't the end of the ranged attacks. From the third formation came a few magic spells that burst inside Barbro's army, though still quite a ways in front of his position. In a flash of light, crimson flowers bloomed and scattered in a flurry of burning petals. The series of explosions sent soldiers flying.

The casters wore deep hoods that concealed their faces. In one

hand, they each held a long staff that radiated a mysterious glow.

The one at the head of the group lifted its hood to reveal its wizened face.

“We are the Goblin Magic Support Corps under General Enri. We use not only buffing spells but debuffs and attack spells as well. Shall we familiarize you with our powers?”

That wasn't the only unit casting spells. Next to the Goblin Magic Support Corps, there was a similar-looking unit. There were only five of them, but each of their faces looked supremely confident. The goblin out front with the most impudent smile raised its voice.

“We are the Goblin Magic Bombardment Squad under General Enri. Specialized in offensive area-of-effect spells, we are the unit with the most attack power.”

“Your Highness!”

A knight returned to Barbro. It was easy to tell what he was going to say just from the frantic look on his face. The presence of casters meant a significant boost in the enemy army's strength.

“This is the limit of what we can do! We can't suppress them! It's only a matter of time before enemy soldiers reach your position! Please order the withdrawal!”

Barbro had to. Even if he told them to stay and fight, the nobles who followed him here would probably scramble to escape. Even if he forced them, they would only resent him and become his future enemies.

“Do it. And order the baron to go first.”

He would have liked to be the first to escape himself, but it wasn't hard to imagine getting a bad reputation as the coward who was the first to flee before the goblins or the like. He would have the baron take that inglorious role.

“Understood!”

The moment after the knight relayed the orders to his waiting subordinate—

“You won't get away!”

—a familiar voice sounded from right next to Barbro, and he felt for the first time that his life was in danger.

As his escorts drew their swords and scanned the area, figures dressed all in black slipped out of the shadows. Their faces were masked, but their sharp eyes glittered.

“We are the Goblin Assassin Squad under General Enri! This will surely be the last time we who lurk in shadows come into the light.”

And there was one more.

He appeared, as if he couldn't help himself, in a red hat, iron shoes, and a scythe, like a god of death.

“I am one of the Goblin Guards—the Thirteen Redcaps serving under General Enri. Well, I guess there's not really a reason for me to be here, but...”

“Guard His Highness! Sound the gong for withdrawal!”

“Not so fast!”

A shadow moved. At least, that was all Barbro could make out.

One of the knights vanished from the neck up, and his blood spurted out like a fountain.

When his brain comprehended what he was looking at, Barbro spurred his horse into a gallop. He was no longer at leisure to fret about who would flee first. He was standing on the razor's edge between life and death.

The drums of the Goblin Military Band under General Enri pounded obnoxiously behind him.

“...Is it okay that we let them get away?”

“That was the strategist's orders. If we took the prince's head, there would be no hope of finding a middle ground with the kingdom.”

“Hmm. That's true. If General Enri was killed, I wouldn't stop until every last enemy was dead, either. The strategist is brilliant. He has his eye on the future. Is that the same reason we didn't wipe out the soldiers?”

“Indeed it is. We need them to escort the prince back to the city. Mind you, I found it offensive as well. I would have liked to get revenge on them for attacking General Enri's village... All right, Redcaps. Let's take care of the corpses.”

“Yeah. We need to recover the bodies of the brave heroes who fought with the leader of the earlier group.”

The meadow was bathed in moonlight, and in the middle of it was a camp. Then again, with no tents, wooden fences, or anything, could it really be called a camp? Perhaps the most accurate thing to say was that there was an army in the middle of the meadow.

Most of them were lying on the ground with utter exhaustion written on their faces.

The reason they could sleep with no bedding during a winter so cold their breath came out white must have been because they were dead tired. One man walked among the soldiers lying like discarded rag dolls.

It was the general of the defeated army, Barbro.

Should he have felt lucky that he survived or unlucky that they encountered such a formidable enemy?

The great goblin army that suddenly appeared in Carne was a powerful adversary—no, overpowering. As a result of their clash, Barbro's forces had been broken in an instant, and they had no choice but to flee in a rout. He had been losing soldiers so fast it was like his forces were melting away.

Where did those goblins come from?

He wanted to know.

One possibility he thought of was that an army of goblins was building a huge kingdom in the Tove Woodlands. A group like that coming south was the most convincing explanation.

The nobles who had fled with him appeared to have arrived at the same conclusion and had consoled him as they fled.

We got unlucky.

Those have to be the most elite goblins.

Just bringing home word of those goblins is a fine deed.

"So stupid..."

Barbro clenched his fists.

Defeat was defeat. Certainly, the goblins had been tough. Anyone who had fought them would know that there wasn't anything Barbro could have done.

But to someone who wasn't in the know, Barbro was the prince who had been defeated by goblins. He would surely be ridiculed.

"Shit! Shit! Shit!"

The bile rose in his throat. This was the reason that although he was as exhausted as the soldiers, Barbro alone couldn't sleep.

When he closed his eyes, he heard the taunts and jeers that would surely be waiting for him in the palace when he returned.

Barbro's fight was over. His army was in no shape to travel to the Katze Plain and join the battle against the empire.

At that very moment, he sensed a presence. Not those of his men on the ground but from the direction they had run from.

Was it a straggler returning or a unit of goblins coming to attack?

With his heart pounding, Barbro shifted his gaze, but in the next moment, he screwed his face up in confusion.

She must have realized he noticed her because she raised a hand and casually greeted him.

“Hiya.”

Where had she come from in the middle of this meadow? There, a mere twenty yards away, stood a peerless beauty with a smile that seemed best described as *innocent*. If he had been in a city, she would have turned his head. But this was the middle of a meadow—there wasn’t even a village nearby.

The strangest thing of all was the clothes she wore—something like a maid uniform.

If the woman had been armed, he could have guessed she was an adventurer. But that was impossible.

A monster?

The thought popped into his head. Some monsters had exceedingly beautiful appearances—sprites, for a major example. But he couldn’t grasp why she had a maid uniform.

“Hey there. I came over to play! Do ya have a minute?”

Clearly, she was making fun of him.

“Who are you?” he challenged her, putting a hand on the sword at his hip.

It was an awfully lame question. But he really had no idea who she was. Her existence was so unfathomable, he didn’t know where to begin.

“I’m Lupusregina, one of Lord Ainz’s maids.”

She stuck a hand up again and waved—*what a strange woman*. Then the meaning of the words she said sank into his brain.

“Wh-what?” Barbro was so surprised he forgot about waking up the nearby soldiers.

“Well, eh, settin’ that aside—what a tough time you guys had, ’ey? But that was pretty low, huh? Having to face that great goblin army was no fair. Seriously, though, I was standin’ behind that human, En, watchin’ and I screeched ’cause I was so surprised! Who knew that many goblins would come out? Ha-ha-ha-ha!”

Lupusregina’s laugh was artificial.

It was an obvious provocation, but Barbro couldn’t bear it in his current state.

“What have you come for, then?!”

There was some movement behind him in response to his shout.

If she came intending to attack, she’s acting quite strange. There’s no point in revealing herself to us. Or is this all a plot to draw our attention? Maybe after gathering our eyes and ears on her, someone else will sneak

attack from behind?

No, I'm the eldest prince—I'm quite valuable.

If I'm lucky, there will be a negotiation. If I'm not, I'll be made a hostage.

Well, maybe negotiation would be a little too convenient. Surely, I'll be taken prisoner.

Barbro felt the throne recede again.

That said, the high-ranking royal aides who sent him out there without any intelligence on the massive number of goblins in that village could be put first in line for the blame.

If I'm captured, I should get the chance to meet Ainz Ooal Gown. Maybe it's not a bad idea to give him a quarter of the kingdom and then have him cooperate to make me king.

Perhaps there's a blessing to be found in this curse.

That was the sort of thing on Barbro's mind.

"Ohh, there's only one reason I'm here." She paused for a breath and then declared, "I came to kill you all."

Barbro blinked several times and then screamed. "Huh?! What are you talking about?! Do you know who I am?! I'm the eldest prince of the Re-Estize Kingdom, Barbro Andréan Yeld Ryle Vaiself!"

Lupusregina sighed. "But you're just a human, yeah? Am I wrong? To us, that makes ya worthless. Oh, but I do know you're a prince."

"Then... Oh, I see. You mean you'll kill everyone besides me? I can't really say that's a good idea, though. Even if you take me hostage, you'll have to let someone go to tell my father, the king, and it'll just make your negotiations harder."

Lupusregina cocked her head, looking puzzled. "No, no. What are you going on about? I'll say it again. I'm gonna kill you all. 'I'm gonna kill you all' means I'm gonna kill all of you. Guess ya don't have much for brains in there, huh? Ohh, in that sense, you might be kinda rare, but I'm not interested."

"What are *you* going on about? Do you still not understand what I'm worth?! I'm the eldest prince, for crying out loud! Where are you getting the idea to kill me?! Most people would take me prisoner and demand a huge ransom! Or land or something! It's much more beneficial to use me as a tool for negotiation than to kill me!"

"...Hoo boy, you just don't get it." Lupusregina put on a creepy grin. Then she continued in a gentle voice one might use to explain something to a child. "The ever-lofty one, Lord Ainz Ooal Gown, simply doesn't need you for his plan. So I'm killing you. Got it?"

Barbro couldn't find any words—because it was clear that Lupusregina wasn't joking around or threatening him in order to manipulate him.

He gulped in spite of himself.

“...Are you serious? Are you really going to kill me...?”

“Ooh, nice. Love that face you’re makin’. You just went up quite a few notches on my list of faves.”

“Then...” Barbro tried to smile with his twitching face, but Lupusregina replied with no expression.

“Lord Ainz ordered me to kill all of you; that’s why I’m not letting any of you leave this place alive.”

Then she suddenly made a goofy face.

“I put a lotta thought into what sort of guys you would have fun with, and I came up with an opponent who’s perfect for you guys, since you had such a rough time with those goblins!”

She spread her arms with a “ta-da!” Behind her, multiple figures appeared, almost as if they had seeped out of thin air.

“I asked for these to be summoned—Redcaps!”

There were thirty in all.

They bore a close resemblance to the ones from before, appearing to be ugly, twisted goblins.

They all wore bright-red pointed hats and iron shoes. They were armed with adzes. In the moonlight, they seemed to glow blue.

“Attack! What do you think you’re doing? Wake up! Hurry! Get your weapons! The enemy is attacking!”

Barbro’s screams roused the soldiers completely, and they jumped up promptly. In the bright moonlight, they squinted at the enemy.

“They’re level forty-three. Honestly, it’s totally overkill, but we didn’t have any goblins weaker than this in the library.”

Someone screamed.

The soldiers who had just come from a hellish battle with goblins couldn’t find the spirit to face more goblins.

Without even taking up their swords, they fled in confusion.

“Don’t run! Fight! Fight! Fight! Aren’t you going to protect me?!”

Not a single soldier followed Barbro’s instructions. The nobles ran for their horses.

“Ah-ha-ha-ha! Fantastic! You think you can get away in the middle of this open field? Ahhh, this is so fun! Just the best! I love this!”

Lupusregina’s taunt was actually exactly what was on Barbro’s mind.

The only way out of this was to defeat the enemies.

“Looks like some of these guys are thinkin’, *If I can just make it to my horse, I’ll escape...* Can ya go cut those dummies’ legs off for me?”

Emitting a shrill cheer for the slaughter, the Redcaps began to move.

They were like wild animals.

They ran, weaving their way through the crowd of men trying to

escape.

Then...there was a shriek.

It was one of the nobles who had tried to get away on his horse.

A few more screams.

“Now that there are less of them, the fun time won’t last as long, but...oh well. That just means we’ll need to have as many different kinds of fun as we can. I don’t have abilities like Sol does, but I’ll show you what I got!”

Lupusregina walked toward Barbro, who had drawn his sword. Her gait was so leisurely, it was like she was taking a stroll through the meadow.

The smile running like a fissure across her beautiful face made his blood run cold.

It was thirty minutes later that Barbro was finally allowed to die.



Chapter 4 | Massacre

1

Making use of the gently rolling hills of red earth, the two armies took up their positions and scowled at each other.

The kingdom's army, surprisingly large with 245,000 men, had a right wing of 70,000, a left wing of 70,000, and 105,000 in the center. These were spread resourcefully in camps across three hills. The "camps" were the type made not with fences but with the sheer violence of numbers.

The first five rows of soldiers held spears nearly twenty feet long that required two hands. It was with those thickets of pikes that the positions were constructed.

It was a measure against the main attacking force of the empire, their heavy cavalry, and also acted in place of chevaux-de-frise. The reason they didn't have chevaux-de-frise was simply because it would have taken a ridiculous amount of wood to protect such a huge army. Putting their men to work with the spears was more efficient.

That said, though this formidable formation was strong, it still had many weak points.

The men were crowded together, and due to the heavy weapons, they had their hands full preventing their opponents' charge. For that reason, they lacked the ability to cope with any quick actions, and if the empire launched arrows or spells, they would suffer serious casualties.

But these peasant soldiers weren't being asked to do any more than that. Their only task was to stop their enemy's first attack.

Meanwhile, the empire's army had sixty thousand men.

Compared to the kingdom's forces, they were overwhelmingly few.

But the imperial knights didn't look at all like they expected defeat with their calmly superior faces. They didn't think they would lose.

They were confident because they knew how much stronger they were individually.

Still, the gap in numbers should have been a major concern. If they could fight perpetually without getting tired, maybe not, but that was impossible for humans. If they got worn out, their opponents would eventually catch up, despite the gap in their abilities.

The kingdom had one other big advantage: the gap in the worth of the people.

Most of the soldiers making up the kingdom's army were farmers. In contrast, the empire's knights were professional warriors. If a farmer who was handed a weapon and a knight who required time and effort to train were both killed, the empire's loss was greater. For that reason, the empire wouldn't undertake unreasonable operations or the sort that were likely to get knights killed.

This flat battlefield, then, where all they could do was clash head-on, would work in the kingdom's favor.

That was why previous wars between the kingdom and the empire had always ended as minor scuffles.

The empire normally achieved its goal just by having the kingdom drag its farmers out onto the battlefield. They weren't about to do anything that would deplete their precious human assets, which the kingdom understood quite well.

This sort of essentially rigged fight was what the "wars" between the kingdom and the empire had been.

Most of the kingdom nobles believed that even if the caster Ainz Ooal Gown joined in, this war would still end as a casual dustup. The empire's knights weren't only its military force but also its police organization. They were the power that maintained the peace. Pointless losses were liable to shake the foundations of the country.

The kingdom waited for the empire's forces to make their move.

In a normal year, the imperial army would pass in front of the kingdom's army and then withdraw. Then the kingdom's army would let out a triumphant shout. That was how it usually went.

But...

The imperial forces weren't moving.

They had left their fortresslike barracks and taken up a position opposite the kingdom's forces, but they hadn't moved a muscle since then. It was almost as if they were waiting for the kingdom to make a move, or perhaps there was something else they were waiting for.

"They're not moving, huh? What could it mean?"

Slightly behind the 105,000 men jostling in the central group was the king's position.

It was the safest position, located on top of a somewhat tall hill.

Marquis Raeven, standing next to Gazef, was the one who had

spoken as he looked out at the unmoving imperial knights.

If the empire didn't move, the kingdom couldn't move, either.

As conveyed by the thickets of spears, the kingdom knew that attacking would be the height of folly. A long time ago, some nobles had taken the initiative to attack, but they were killed instantaneously, and the kingdom ended up suffering substantial losses.

Ever since then, the kingdom's tactics for facing the empire were to set up their spear walls and wait. If their opponents would fall back on their own, there was no sense in leaping into danger.

"Well, it seems like they're waiting for us to move..."

"The final proposals have already been given, and the war has already started... Captain—Sir Gazef, do you have any idea what the empire might be waiting for?"

Thirty minutes ago, messengers had negotiated between the two armies glaring at each other. Well, they called them "negotiations," but it was more like a game of exchanging unfeasible conditions. Basically, they said, *Look how merciful we're being*, pretending to avoid the war to the last even though their offers were self-serving.

Naturally, they failed to reach an understanding, and it always came down to war.

In a normal year, the empire would have already been on the move. But this year, they weren't. They simply stood at attention.

"Any idea? I mean... Do you?"

"No... I don't know much about military matters, so I've always left it up to my men."

"I know all too well how knowledgeable you are, your lordship, so that sounds an awful lot like a lie, but..."

"A lie, hmm...? You certainly don't mince words, Sir Gazef."

"Have I offended you? If so, I'm sorry."

"Ha-ha-ha. No, that's fine. I much prefer this attitude to how you were before."

Gazef picked up on the jab and frowned.

"Ha-ha-ha. Please just accept what I said. It's the truth that I don't have much skill in moving troops. And I happen to have a man under me who excels in just that. I'm not lying. I leave it up to him."

"Could it be one of the former adventurers who are now famous for their performance during the demon disturbance?"

"Oh, no, they're over there."

A group of five people was standing in the corner Marquis Raeven pointed at.

They had all entered middle age and were probably past their prime, but as they were also former orichalcum-plate adventurers, even Gazef had the feeling that one couldn't be too careful around

them.

“They’re my bodyguards.”

“If you have such strong people protecting you, you’ll be sure to make it back to the capital in one piece...assuming we don’t have to face that great caster. But wait, so who is your strategist?”

“You don’t know him. He’s a commoner from my domain. I heard about him because he fought off a horde of goblins attacking his village with only half as many villagers. After that, I started putting him in command...and the surprising thing is, he hasn’t lost yet. He’s that good. I’ve given him a high rank in my staff.”

“If he can earn such praise from you, Marquis Raeven, then...I’d like to meet him. I’d like to give him command of the entire kingdom’s army.”

“If you put him in command...and the kingdom’s army operated as one, I’m sure he would do battle in ways that would make neighboring countries say, ‘You mustn’t take the Re-Estize Kingdom’s army lightly’...”

Gazef and Marquis Raeven looked at each other, heaved tired sighs, and smiled.

“The nobles would never allow a commoner to command the army. At present, it’s a pipe dream.”

“Yeah, it’s impossible while we have these factions.”

The imperial army had proper organization with a general in charge of each army and then division commanders and battalion commanders.

But in the kingdom, each noble brought his own soldiers, so even with the king as the overall commander, each unit acted according to their own ideas and faction alignment.

To be blunt, the army had no unity whatsoever.

Even Gazef was charged with leading the Royal Select only as their captain; it wasn’t as if he could give orders to the nobles. Certainly, there was the possibility of getting his ideas through as orders from the king, but many of the nobles looked down on Gazef due to his common background and would find it disagreeable, so it could cause trouble for him in the future. The king knew that, so when he gave orders, he didn’t do it through Gazef.

The two men sighed heavily at the state of their country. Then they looked at each other and smiled.

This discussion was one to have somewhere else, not on the battlefield where swords were about to clash.

“If we survive this, we’ll still be on the battlefield, I guess.”

“I hear that’s how it is for nobles.”

“When this is over, I’m going to tell the king to please make you a noble. It irritated me that you were the king’s sword, yet you never

tried to engage with noble society.”

The marquis said it in a joking way, but Gazef could see from the glint in his eyes that he actually was angry.

He was glad that someone so skilled at concealing his emotions would show them to him, but it wasn't as nice when it was a negative emotion. Gazef changed the subject.

“...Well, leaving that for now...could we call over your strategist? I'd like to talk to him...although I guess it's tricky to have him come here at the moment.”

“Yes, he's heading up my position. We don't know when the empire will make its move, so I want to keep him where he is.”

Marquis Raeven may have been cooperating with the kingdom, but his top priority was still his own domain. Refusing was only natural.

“Even though it's the same old pattern, I just don't like this tense atmosphere.” Gazef sighed. “I'm not hoping for a serious charge from the empire, but if they're going to attack, it'd be better for my mental health if they would just launch it already.” He sensed the unsteadiness in the kingdom's army and tried to locate the source. “...Aha. One potential strategy the empire could take is to wait for the kingdom to get antsy and act. It would be hard to move all these men together. But for that reason, any forces' slightest movement will look like a large ripple from the edge. Even if we're packed together and there are too many of us to go on the attack, they could easily rip to pieces any prey that is out of line. They're like a beast on the hunt.”

Marquis Raeven followed Gazef's nervous gaze, but when he saw the soldiers in the left wing rushing around, he seemed to grasp something.

“It looks to me like they're trying to move soldiers from the back up to the front line.”

“If they're only changing formation, then we don't need to worry, but...”

“That's Marquis Beauleurope's flag. It seems like the general of the left wing means to move up to the front line himself.”

The kingdom had nobles' faction members on either wing and king's faction members concentrated in the center.

The commander of the center group was King Ramposa III, and the commander of the left wing was Marquis Beauleurope.

“It's highly unusual for the general to change the formation so he's up front. You know, Sir Gazef, that the marquis brought his elite men. This war will get the attention of many nobles, so if his forces can put up an admirable fight against the individually stronger imperial knights, he'll be recognized as the noble with the strongest unit in the kingdom.” Marquis Raeven flashed a provocative look at

Gazef as if to say, *Won't it bother you if his unit is considered stronger than your Royal Select?*

But that wasn't about to ruffle Gazef. "The Royal Select is guarding His Majesty. Even if the empire charges, I have no intention of moving them without His Majesty's orders. Their only job is to make sure the king gets back to the capital safely." He patted his sword. "Although there's the possibility that I go out on my own to kill the enemy's momentum."

"The kingdom has four treasures, and that's Razor Edge? I see..." The marquis looked at Gazef from top to bottom.

The Gauntlets of Vitality made it so the wearer never got fatigued; the Amulet of Immortality constantly healed the wearer; Guardian Armor, made from the hardest metal in existence, adamantite, was said to be able to save the wearer from a fatal critical hit; and Razor Edge was a magic sword enchanted in the pursuit of sharpness that cut armor like butter.

"With all of them equipped, you yourself are the kingdom's greatest treasure. I heard that the kingdom originally had five treasures, but have they always been together right here?"

Receiving such an overblown compliment, being compared to a treasure, Gazef knew it was flattery but couldn't stop himself from blushing. "Oh, cut it out, Marquis Raeven. His Majesty is the truly amazing one. Knowing full well what it would mean to lend all these to a commoner, he still entrusted them to me."

"You do have a point. Honestly, I thought it was foolish to entrust them to a commoner. I thought it would only mean more people leaving the king's faction. But now that we're here together on the battlefield, it seems like a great idea, as self-centered as that is."

"I hope I can live up to your expectations..."

Gazef looked out at the ranks of imperial knights.

With the exception of Triad Caster Fluder Paradyne, he didn't feel like they had any particularly strong opponents. He was confident that he could beat their strongest four knights. He even had a faint hope that, with all the treasures equipped, he could take Fluder.

But he didn't think he could beat Ainz Ooal Gown.

He just couldn't see it happening.

No matter how positively he tried to visualize things, no matter how optimistic he was, he saw himself getting killed with a single mysterious spell.

"What's wrong?"

"A-ah, nothing..." He was known as the kingdom's strongest warrior. If he showed any weakness, it would have an adverse effect on the soldiers' morale. "I mean, I was just feeling sorry for Prince Barbro."

“Sorry for him...? Could it be that...? Ah, I see. Hmm. So you... I see.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“No, it just seems like you think that the king sent the prince to Carne to stop him from achieving anything here.”

“Was there some other reason?”

Marquis Raeven winced. “Yes, there certainly was. His Majesty really trusts you, you know.”

Gazef had no idea what that was supposed to mean, and it showed on his doubtful face, so the marquis explained.

“Naturally, if the king’s most trusted captain is extremely wary of Ainz Ooal Gown, so is he. Rather than putting his son on a battlefield where no one knows what will happen, he sent him somewhere safe, even though there isn’t as much to achieve there... The old me would have been offended that he sent his child somewhere safe when so many parents were sending their children to the battlefield...” Then he smiled with the face of a father. “But now I understand. I would probably do the same for my son.”

“Yeah, Marquis Raeven, you’re a father through and through.”

Marquis Raeven smiled. Gazef knew it was rude, but he couldn’t help but think it was out of character for his expression to be so warm, happy, and proud.

“I sure am. I promised I’d play with him a bunch after this war is over—I’m an utterly normal father. Oh, but we’ve gotten off topic. Anyhow, that’s how it is...but I’m sure Prince Barbro doesn’t understand his father’s feelings. That’s a bit sad, a parent’s feelings not getting through to his child.”

Gazef wasn’t sure how to respond. He didn’t have kids, so he couldn’t really relate.

“R-right. Do you think there could be a detachment going to raid E-Rantel? They might stop at nothing to bring it down, even if they were heavily criticized.”

I’ve been changing the subject every time I don’t know what to say, thought Gazef, but the marquis went along with it.

“It won’t be so easy to take down E-Rantel with its three layers of walls. It would probably be tough even if they mobilized their two remaining corps. My strategist doubts they would try an operation like that.”

“Oh? But what about using flying mounts? Or what if they had another secret army?”

“It would be impossible. Ultimately, it’s a difficult proposition to conquer a city with small numbers. Without more people, they wouldn’t be able to take it... Ah, Sir Gazef, there’s one critical requirement for capturing E-Rantel. Do you know what it is?”

Gazef honestly shook his head.

“You need to claim a great victory in a head-on fight with the kingdom. If it was a narrow victory, it would be difficult to rule after the fact. There is no way the citizens would take kindly to invaders, so a resistance movement would spring up. Even if the empire managed to take E-Rantel with a detachment, if our soldiers were unharmed, they would move immediately to retake it. That’s why the empire is aiming for a crushing victory. That way the citizens will be too scared to resist and there won’t be enough army left to fight.”

Essentially, the empire had to win this battle. And it had to be such an overwhelming victory that it would make neighboring countries, and especially the kingdom, think twice about trying to retake the territory.

Suddenly, Gazef felt like he had all the pieces of the puzzle. He just couldn’t discern what he was supposed to be seeing.

He was tormented by a vague sense of foreboding.

“What’s wrong, Sir Gazef?”

“Mm...”

He thought if he told Marquis Raeven about all the mixed-up puzzle pieces in his head, he would use his superior intellect to put them together for him, but the marquis suddenly turned to face the empire’s position.

“Sir Gazef, it seems they’re finally making a move.”

The imperial army was parting as if to create a path. Just as Gazef figured they must have been splitting to counter the kingdom’s left and right wings, a flag he didn’t recognize was raised in the center.

It was a flag with a crest that Gazef had absolutely no knowledge of, from neither the kingdom nor the empire. A group of figures bearing it proceeded forward.

All eyes were on that group.

Then Gazef had a sense of dread. Next to him, surely witnessing the same events, Marquis Raeven swallowed hard. Realizing he wasn’t the only one feeling it, Gazef sensed a bitter taste spread across the back of his tongue, and his heart began to pound.

They were a strange force.

It was about five hundred mounted soldiers—hardly anything compared to the two armies facing each other.

But there was something...abnormal...about them. Even at this distance, their ghastly presence seemed to pummel him.

Gazef’s memories of Carne came vividly back to him. The monster knights Ainz said he had created. There were about two hundred warriors with the same spiked armor and giant shields.

The rest were also grotesque soldiers, but they wore leather armor, and he saw they carried weapons like axes, spears, and

crossbows.

If the ones in front were knights, then the ones in the back were warriors, he supposed.

Either way, they weren't human. They were genuine monsters.

And they were riding magical beasts. They could properly be described as bone monsters, wrapped in a wavering fog rather than flesh. Yellow like pus and a brilliant green occasionally flashed within the haze.

Gazef's whole body erupted in goose bumps.

This is bad.

This is really bad.

His impression wasn't terribly articulate, but he couldn't come up with any words more appropriate.

"...So the empire has incorporated monsters into its army? This is quite a surprise. Really gives you goose bumps."

"No. No, Marquis Raeven, that's not it. That's not why you have goose bumps."

"Hmm?" the marquis asked curiously.

"It's the threat of death. It stimulates our human survival instinct." Marquis Raeven was surprised, but Gazef turned away from him to look at the imperial army. "Their horses are cowering. Even trained warhorses are frightened into paralysis..."

"...What could that possibly be? Does the empire have a secret unit?"

"...No, how could that be? Those aren't monsters that humans could tame and control!" He wasn't sure what kind of monsters they were, but his intuition as a warrior made him confident of that. "That has to be...Ainz Ooal Gown's cavalry!"

"That...! That's the...?! That's the army of the caster you're afraid of?!"

"Marquis Raeven! I want you to gather your former adventurers on the double! What is the optimal course of action? I want to ask people who have fought tons of monsters and lived!"

"Un—"

He was probably going to say he understood. But before he could, they moved to protect their master. Of course they did. They probably had a better idea of how powerful their opponents were than even Gazef.

"Marquis Raeven!"

The former orichalcum plates raced over on their horses.

"Did you see that?! Do you feel it?!"

At the head of the group was their leader, a holy knight of the fire god, Boris Axelson.

His voice contained fear he couldn't hide.

Marquis Raeven was speechless. Gazef knew exactly how he felt.

A former orichalcum-plate adventurer, in this position protected by a huge army, was so frightened his voice was trembling.

Gazef determined it was no longer any time to be fretting about manners and asked, "Tell me, what is that? No need for introductions! I just want you to tell me what you know!"

Boris clutched the sigil hanging around his neck as if it would protect him.

"...I'm not sure, but the monsters they're riding seem to be the soul eaters of legend. They're a type of greedy undead that devours the souls of the living. Folklore says they appeared in a city in the center of the continent, in the country of the beastmen."

"And...what was the damage?"

Boris's reply was horribly quiet.

"A hundred thousand..."

Gazef gasped.

"...Supposedly, three soul eaters showed up, and the city was destroyed. Ninety-five percent of the population—over a hundred thousand people—died, and legend has it that it was renamed the Silent City, then abandoned."

A heavy silence fell.

"...And there are five hundred of them here?"

No one had the strength to answer Marquis Raeven's question.

Gazef finally managed to squeeze out some words. "As I said earlier, I don't think the empire could control monsters like that on its own, even with their great caster Fluder Paradyne. So..."

He didn't have to finish for Marquis Raeven to understand.

"S-so this is the power of Ainz Ooal Gown? Then what are the things riding those monsters?"

"That..." The adventurers looked at one another. "We don't know. But they're just as dangerous. No, my apologies. This probably requires a proper explanation, not a vague word like *dangerous*, but nothing better comes to mind."

"Wh-what should we do, Sir Gazef?!"

Gazef responded to Marquis Raeven's unnerved question concisely.

"Withdraw." He understood well enough that the enemy had prepared a shocking army. So what else could they do but run away? "I'll suggest it to the kin—"

He didn't get to finish what he was saying—because a masked caster took up position at the head of the army. To his right was a small figure in a hooded robe. To his left was one of the empire's Four.

Even at that distance, Gazef knew who it was at a glance.

“Sir Gown...”

“That’s the caster Ainz Ooal Gown?!”

“He summoned the soul eaters? That guy? Marquis Raeven, what...?” The veteran hero gulped and gasped in a murmur, “What are we going up against?”

Ainz waved an arm. In response, a gigantic dome-shaped magic circle—it must have been at least thirty feet across—suddenly appeared with Ainz at its center. The two standing to either side of him were also inside it, but nothing seemed to happen to them as a result. It must not have been something that could hurt his allies.

Even the ones who knew they were facing an emergency couldn’t help but watch the fantastic spectacle.

The magic circle glowed pale blue, and patterns like translucent letters or symbols appeared on it. These letters changed at a dizzying rate; the same pattern didn’t linger for even an instant.

A gasp of surprise went up from the kingdom. It was like the oohs or aahs one might emit while seeing a splendid show; they contained no tension. But those with sharp intuitions began looking around in confusion.

“I’m going back to my army. We can’t even consider a clash anymore. Ainz Ooal Gown’s power is on another level, and trying to do battle with him was a mistake. From now on, we should focus on figuring out how to make it back to E-Rantel while keeping losses to a minimum. Sir Gazef, protect His Majesty and withdraw at once!”

Marquis Raeven had been so calm until just moments ago but no longer.

“Right! I’m not sure how much I can do, but I will go guard the king! And we shouldn’t retreat in ranks, but—”

“Of course not. This will be a withdrawal at a furious pace—it’s a rout.”

“Very well, Marquis Raeven. I hope you’ll be safe!”

“And you, Sir Gazef!”

The kingdom’s greatest intellect and warrior leaped into motion. Except...

It was far too late.

•

Guess there aren’t any, Ainz determined as he expanded the magic circle.

There were no players in the kingdom’s army.

Super-tier spells from the game *Yggdrasil* were immensely

powerful.

For that reason, in a large-scale battle, neutralizing anyone trying to cast one first was the basics of combat.

Using teleport to close in and stab, magic carpet bombing, long-range sniping—there were countless methods of attack.

Yet no one came at Ainz. Their absence was proof that there were no other *Yggdrasil* players present.

Without anyone knowing, Ainz's mouth beneath his mask twisted into a smile—although of course, it was impossible for him to smile as a skeleton.

The wry grin of his subtle delight spoke volumes about his mood.

“I guess I don't need to be bait anymore.”

He was glad he didn't encounter any *Yggdrasil* players.

Ainz could not be called the strongest among *Yggdrasil* players. There was always someone stronger. Against a player stronger than him, he probably didn't stand much of a chance. Ainz's power during the era of the game had stemmed from his knowledge. In PvP, he had a high win ratio, but it could be considered a streak only if the first encounters were ignored.

Ainz was actually ingenious when it came to utilizing information he accumulated. Conversely, against opponents he faced for the first time, his loss ratio was extremely high.

He knew himself to some degree, so he was thankful he hadn't encountered a new, strong enemy.

On the other hand, it was a bit of a disappointment.

It didn't seem like they would find any leads about the being who possessed the World Item and had brainwashed Shalltear.

There was still some stubborn hatred in Ainz's mind. Waves of powerful emotions were suppressed, but the ripples of weaker emotions persisted.

Ainz opened his hands, and inside was a small hourglass.

He could have used a cash store item to cast the super-tier spell immediately. The reason he hadn't was that he was acting as bait for *Yggdrasil* players. But if there weren't any, he no longer had any reason to space out during the long casting time. It was really uncool to stand around in the middle of a magic circle.

During the fight with Shalltear, he had been too stressed out.

During the fight with the lizardmen, he didn't use attack magic.

So...

“I'm really looking forward to this. Ahh, it's going to be so fun...”

What kind of effect would his super-tier spell have on the kingdom's army?

In *Yggdrasil*, this one wasn't so powerful, but what would it do in this world?

Suddenly, Ainz furrowed his nonexistent brow.

He was ever so slightly horrified by his complete lack of pity or any other emotion for the numerous humans who would die. He truly felt nothing—not even the guilt that came from stomping on an ant.

What he did feel was a desire to see the outcomes of his actions. That, and the benefits that he and the Great Tomb of Nazarick would reap.

Ainz focused energy into his hands.

The sand falling out of the broken hourglass flowed toward the magic circle, surrounding him in a motion that was different from the wind's.

And the super-tier spell was cast instantly.

“Iä Shub-Niggurath!”

A dark breath blew past the left wing of the kingdom's army, which had finally finished reorganizing its formation.

No, there was no actual wind. None of the grasses on the plain nor the hairs on the kingdom's soldiers' heads rustled.

But all seventy thousand men of the kingdom army's left wing...
...were robbed of their lives in an instant.

2

What had just happened?

Not a single person understood right away.

All the living things that made up the kingdom's army's left wing—not just the humans but the horses, too—fell to the ground like marionettes whose strings had been cut.

The first to realize what had happened was the imperial army facing them.

What the imperials had seen was so unbelievable that there was a lag between then and when their brains arrived at a conclusion. At that point, the commotion became an unusually large wave that engulfed the entire army.

Certainly, they had known that when Ainz Ooal Gown projected the magic circle, he was probably about to unleash some sort of spell.

But who could have predicted this?

Who knew he would cast something so horrifying?

Who would have thought he would use a spell that would slaughter seventy thousand men—more than all the imperial troops

that had been deployed to this battlefield combined—in an instant?

Doubting their eyes, the imperial knights all prayed to whatever they believed in.

That the kingdom soldiers weren't dead.

That such a horrible spell didn't exist in this world.

Of course, with the truth right in front of them—no one was getting up—they knew that was nothing more than wishful thinking.

But their emotions wouldn't accept it. They didn't want to acknowledge the truth as the truth.

Even Nimble, one of the Four, those pillars of imperial strength, was staring at the now-deserted kingdom left wing position with his teeth chattering in fear.

The reality that no one was getting up was so, so terrifying.

No, a description that simple couldn't cover it.

Ainz Ooal Gown, this caster, was a monster who could tear down human nations as if they were sandcastles.

That reality hit Nimble stronger than any words.

The commotion enveloping the imperial army ebbed like a tide and vanished. Eventually, everyone kept silent, no one daring to speak.

Once everything was still in the imperial army position, a bizarre noise echoed. It was so many noises overlapping that it was actually quite a racket. It was the sound of every single knight's teeth clacking together.

Fear—because they all knew that their beloved empire, where their families lived, was on the brink of destruction just like the kingdom.

Making an enemy of Ainz Ooal Gown would mean that spell would be shot at them.

Suddenly, Nimble wondered how the inhuman caster felt after such a massive magical slaughter.

Without turning his head, he stole a look out of the corner of his eye at the monster standing next to him, and the monster was unfazed.

That can't be. That can't be. This... How can he be so calm?! He just robbed seventy thousand people of their lives! I get that this is a battlefield—a place for such atrocities to occur. It's only natural to slay your weak opponents. But isn't it natural to feel something after killing that many people?

It would have been perfectly natural to feel guilt or regret. Joy or delight, he would have been able to understand in the context of an atypical mind.

But...

Is feeling nothing a defensive instinct to protect his psyche? No. This monster is used to seeing scenes like this! He doesn't even feel the pity or dark glee of a human stomping a bunch of ants. What is this? It's awful... Why is a guy like this in the human world?

"What?"

"Eek!" It was like having cold steel driven through him. After emitting such a stupid noise in response to the question, Nimble tried to gloss over it. "N-nothing. That was a wonderful spell."

He wanted to pat himself on the back for getting some words out. And surely, he deserved the highest praise for even managing to compliment Ainz.

"Ha-ha-ha!"

The response to Nimble's frantic compliment was a chuckle.

"D-did I say something to displease you?"

"No, no, nothing like that. You said, 'That was a wonderful spell,' right?"

"Y-yes."

Was that the part he was scoffing about? Sweat dripped down Nimble's forehead. Having just witnessed how horrible it was to offend this person, he didn't want to upset him in the slightest.

"You don't have to be so guarded. It's just...my spell hasn't finished yet. The best part is yet to come. Our offering to the mother goddess Shub-Niggurath will come back to us bearing the return gift of her young. The young are just adorable."

Yes...

Just like returning ripe fruit to the earth...

•

Once again, it was the imperial knights who noticed *it* first.

It was utterly natural that the knights watching from the distance in the safest position would be the first to notice. It was precisely because they felt safe that they were able to see it even with their narrow field of vision through the slits in their helmets.

After the whirlpool of death robbed the kingdom soldiers of their lives, a weird pitch-black sphere appeared out of the heavens as if it were going to soil the world.

So who was the first kingdom soldier to notice it? This is mere conjecture, but since the right-wing soldiers had their view obstructed, it was probably them. Even if they realized something unusual was going on, not knowing what, they would have looked around and spotted it.

Compelled to follow their neighbor's gaze, the next soldier and the next soldier after that noticed. Soon, all the people who had been

about to wage war on the Katze Plain were just staring silently at the black sphere floating in the sky.

The sphere, like a hole in the sky, seemed almost like it was covered in a spiderweb, in that anyone who saw it found themselves unable to look away.

The black orb grew gradually larger.

They couldn't think anything constructive like, *Let's run* or *Let's fight*.

They could only stare mutely, as if they had dementia.

Before long...the adequately ripened fruit fell.

In what seemed like the obvious outcome, the sphere popped when it touched the ground.

Like a water balloon bursting against the ground, like a ripe fruit rupturing.

The contents of the sphere radiated out from the point of impact. It was like coal tar—a sticky liquid spreading its pitch-blackness everywhere, reflecting no light at all. It began to conceal the dead kingdom soldiers.

Perhaps operating under some abnormal instinct, no one thought this was the end.

And more than that, they had the feeling it was only the beginning.

Yes—the beginning of despair.

From the earth coated in the black liquid grew a single tree.

No, it wasn't anything so cute as a tree.

What once was one began to multiply. Two, three, five, ten...

Swaying where there was no wind, what had grown there were... tentacles.

“Baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

All of a sudden, they heard something adorable, like a goat's bleating. And it wasn't just one. It was like a herd of goats had appeared out of nowhere.

As if drawn by the voices, the coal tar wriggled and then sprayed upward to reveal something.

It was too strange, too different.

It must have been over thirty feet tall. Counting the tentacles, it was hard to say.

Shapewise, it resembled a turnip. Instead of leaves, it had several writhing black tentacles, and the root part was a bumpy lump of flesh. From below that grew five goatlike black legs with hooves.

There were splits in the root part—the bumpy lump of flesh—that peeled back in flaps. And—

“Baaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

The adorable goat bleating issued from those fissures. The splits were mouths drooling a viscous black liquid.

There were five of these.

They had revealed their horrifying selves completely to all the humans on the Katze Plain.

The dark young...

They were monsters that emerged in proportion to the number of sacrifices collected by the super-tier spell Iä Shub-Niggurath. They didn't have any powerful skills, but their stamina was a cut above normal.

And their level...was over 90.

In other words, it was a storm of atrocities.

There were no sounds besides the adorable—sickeningly cute—bleating. It was just that. Unable to believe what they were seeing, unable to accept it, no one tried to talk.

Over three hundred thousand people were gathered—although only two hundred and thirty-five thousand remained alive—and not a single one of them could make so much as a peep.

It was before this horrific spectacle that Ainz laughed.

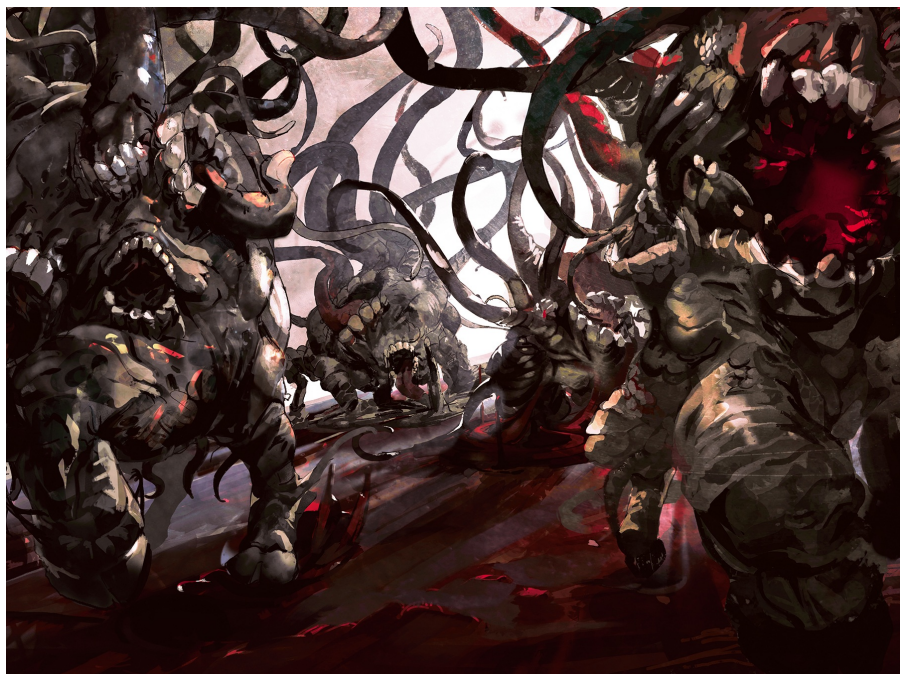
“Wonderful. That’s a record. I’m sure no matter where or when you look, no one has ever summoned five at once before. This is truly awesome. I’ve got to give thanks to all those who died for me.”

Normally, summoning one dark young was great, and the rare feat of summoning two was practically impossible.

But this time he got five.

Just like how any gamer would enjoy setting a new record, Ainz was genuinely happy. He didn't care at all about the tens of thousands who had just perished.

“But I think there should actually be more of them... Maybe five is the cap? But then that means I got the most possible, which is amazing!”



“Congratulations! Brilliant as usual, Lord Ainz.”

Ainz smiled beneath his mask in response to Mare’s praise.

“Thanks, Mare.”

Next, when Ainz looked at Nimble, the knight promptly celebrated him with a crying smile on his face. “C-congratulations.”

“Thanks,” Ainz replied in good spirits.

It tickled him that Nimble openly expressed how touched he was.

Ainz remembered the first time he had seen Iä Shub-Niggurath, back in his *Yggdrasil* player days, and how equally moving an experience it had been for him.

Over-the-top magic, overwhelming magic...it has the power to tug so many people’s heartstrings. No wonder, then, that this was such a popular spell in Yggdrasil. Albedo and Demiurge were both thrilled to hear I would be casting it.

A clattering noise began to echo throughout the imperial army’s position.

It was plates of armor rubbing on each other.

The soldiers were quivering. Who could laugh at something like this?

There wasn’t a single one of them who didn’t get goose bumps from the King of Darkness’s cheerful voice after he had just cast such a dreadful summoning spell.

All the knights had one thing on their minds.

May the power of Ainz Ooal Gown never descend upon me.

It resembled a prayer to a god.

As the soldiers’ wishes gathered on his back, Ainz shifted into the next phase. His spell had already achieved a satisfying effect, but he thought it would be worth it to double down on his attack, just in case.

His objective this time was to advertise the power of Ainz Ooal Gown to nearby countries via super-tier magic.

There was no doubt he had done just that. But it would be a waste to simply erase his creations.

Yes, *a waste.*

Ainz sneered.

If he had had a tongue, he probably would have licked his lips.

In *Yggdrasil*, this never would have been possible, the joy of summoning five dark young at once.

“Oh, let’s see what happens. Begin a follow-up attack, my precious young.”

Following the order from their summoner, the dark young slowly

began to move.

They worked their five legs briskly, with strange motions. Rather than elegant, it was incredibly earnest, which might have had something heartwarming about it.

At least for someone they weren't bearing down on.

Nimble moving their large bodies, the five-legged dark young began to run and charged at the kingdom's army.

"Oh, there are three people—no, four—whom you mustn't kill. Do not harm them."

Recalling the three people Demiurge had pled for, Ainz gave a mental—not that he had a brain—order to the dark young.

•

"This is a dream, right?" one of the kingdom soldiers murmured at the grotesque monsters in the distance.

But there was no answer. How could there have been? Everyone was transfixed by the scene unfolding before their eyes—they didn't have the wherewithal to respond. It was like their souls had been spirited away.

"Hey, tell me it's a dream. I'm dreaming, right?"

"Yeah. It's a fantastically awful dream."

The second time he asked, someone finally replied.

There was something escapist in his tone of voice.

This can't be happening.

I can't believe it.

Feelings like that had infested the troops.

The grotesque beings were growing steadily larger—closer—and the soldiers didn't want to face reality.

If it were simply a couple of monsters, they probably could have mustered the courage to swing their weapons. But when those monsters appeared after a seventy thousand-man block of their army had been wiped out instantaneously, they couldn't be written off as "a couple of monsters." It was like facing a gigantic tornado heading straight for them—no one had the courage to stand and fight.

The strange, immense beings skillfully worked their stumpy legs, charging with quite some speed.

"Spearz ub!"

A voice rang out.

A noble was screaming in a weird octave. His eyes were bloodshot, and he had foam at the corners of his mouth.

"G-ged yer spears ub! Iv you wanna survibe, raiz those spearz ub!"

He was so beside himself with fear that it was hard to understand what he was saying, but it was still possible to discern, "Get your

spears up!”—and that that was the most appropriate order.

The soldiers promptly held up their weapons to form the thickets of blades.

By virtue of the butt end of the spears being fixed to the ground, the speed of any opponent who came charging would be turned into a weapon, and their bodies would be eviscerated.

It was a formation that would give even the empire’s knights trouble, but a rational corner of the soldiers’ minds wondered what meaning the flimsy spears in their hands could possibly have. But they also knew that this formation was their only chance.

It would be next to impossible to run away from these monsters that grew larger and larger as they approached with uncanny speed. If they ran, they would surely be trampled from behind by those huge hooves.

Stay away from me! was the soldiers’ fervent wish as they waited while the monsters charged.

With sickening quickness, the once tiny-seeming horrors grew larger and larger—closer and closer.

As they grew larger, and the ground began to shake, the soldiers’ hearts beat faster.

Eventually, when their hearts were pounding so hard they thought they might burst, the hulking monsters charged right up to them.

The scene resembled a dump truck slamming into a nest of mice.

On the kingdom side, countless spears were held at the ready in trembling hands. But what significance did that hold for the dark young who had such massive, robust bodies? The spears snapped easier than toothpicks, unable to do so much as scratch them.

The immense dark young dove in among the kingdom soldiers.

Innumerable broken spears flew through the air.

Though they trampled the resistance that couldn’t even really be considered resistance, the dark young were merciful—there was no pain.

The overwhelming charge left no opportunity to feel pain.

The soldiers holding spears didn’t even have time to notice the moment the giant bodies smashed their spears. All they were aware of was a dark shadow that blocked out their vision.

A scream went up, then another and another.

Scraps of flesh flew. It wasn’t one or two people. It wasn’t even dozens—it was over a hundred. Flattened under huge feet, batted away—no, obliterated—by waving tentacles.

Nobles, farmers—once they were transformed into scraps of flesh, none of that mattered. Whether they left behind families in their home

Splat.

Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat.

Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat. Splat.

The humans were trampled to death, and all that could be heard was the sound of countless lumps of flesh being created.

•

Three monsters, cutting through the central forces as if they were crossing an empty field, were approaching the right wing, kicking up flesh and blood along the way.

They were nearly upon Marquis Raeven's army.

"Withdraw! Withdraw now!" the marquis screamed.

They couldn't possibly face those things any longer.

There was no need to throw away their lives without reason.

When the soldiers heard the order, they threw down their weapons and fled in a panic.

But there were too many people, leaving them unable to move freely.

At first Marquis Raeven had been thinking of a more organized withdrawal. He had been concerned about being attacked from behind, but wasting time on that had been a huge mistake.

"So this is the caliber of the caster Ainz Ooal Gown?!"

He had underestimated him. Well, he hadn't meant to.

Based on what Gazef Stronoff had said, he had imagined the most powerful being he could. But Ainz Ooal Gown was actually on a level where even that was an underestimation.

This was too far beyond his expectations.

Who in this world could have guessed that Ainz Ooal Gown possessed this much power? Who knew such power even existed?

With an eye on the monsters as they closed the distance, gradually looming larger, he bawled out orders at the nearby soldiers.

"This battlefield is nothing but the site of a massacre now! Just run!"

"Your lordship!" A mounted knight removed his helmet as he shouted. "The king! What will you do about the king?!"

"You idiot! There's no time to think of that!"

"Your lordship! They're nearly upon us!"

At the shout, he shifted his gaze back. The right wing, collapsing as everyone scrambled to get away, was beginning to get overrun. It

seemed like the monsters were making a beeline for him, but it was less like they were aiming for Marquis Raeven and more as if it were just the happenstance outcome. And in reality, the other dark young were nowhere near the marquis's position.

"Where is the king?!"

"Over there!"

When he followed the soldier's pointing finger, he saw there was already a dark young closing in on the king's flag.

The marquis hesitated. What would happen if he went to save him? But if they lost Ramposa III now, it could very well lead to the kingdom's ruin.

But...

"Leave him to Sir Gazef!"

Marquis Raeven trusted Gazef.

He was the warrior the kingdom cherished. Of course, even he probably couldn't defeat the dark young, but surely he could pluck the king out of this hell and make it back alive.

"Marquis Raeven! This is bad! Please hurry and make your escape!"

Marquis Raeven's hesitation disappeared at the shout from his most trusted former orichalcum-plate adventurer.

"Your lordship!"

It was less of a shout and more of a shriek by that point. Marquis Raeven roared back at him, "I know! Let's get out of here!"

He didn't have the wherewithal to employ such a flowery word as *withdraw* with the monsters closing in.

"Please leave rounding up the army to me! You should leave this place as fast as you can! Flee to E-Rantel!"

The one shouting was a man with sleepy eyes. He didn't look like much, but there was no one else he would entrust the army to.

"Do it! If you need my name, use it! I'll take responsibility."

The sound of the hooves was near. He was too scared to turn around, so he kicked his horse. But it didn't move. He kicked harder, but the horse still didn't move. It stood at attention with its ears down.

At that moment, a group of horses tore through the confusion, kicking people aside as they went. The men on top clung desperately to the animals' bodies, seemingly unable to grab the reins.

Ironically, the warhorses who were used to the battlefield were paralyzed with fear, but the untrained horses hurtled away in a panic.

"I never thought training my horse would come back to bite me!"

Horses were skittish by nature. It was through training that they became warhorses who stood unafraid on the battlefield. But that was why his horse was incapable of moving. It had suffering a mental

shock, but its training taught it not to run.

“Scuse me! Lion’s Heart!”

Wing god priest Jorann Dicksgord cast an anti-fear spell on the horse. Having regained composure, it snorted.

“Marquis Raeven! We’ll lead the way!”

“Thanks!”

Marquis Raeven raced off, under the protection of his former orichalcum-plate adventurers, to shouts of “I pray you’ll be safe!”

It was extremely difficult to ride a horse through a crowd that had lost all military discipline, resembling a rioting mob more than an army. But it was possible because his subordinates had been orichalcum-plate adventurers—with skills nearing the upper range of human potential.

They wove expertly through the flow of people.

“That monstrous caster! He can’t be allowed to stay in the human world!” Rocking up and down in time to his horse’s dash, the marquis cursed Ainz. “Shit! We’ve got to do something. We have to think of a way to defend the human world—our future!” He mumbled in spite of himself out of fear. If he didn’t say something, if he didn’t distract himself, the danger would compel his intelligent brain to imagine all the nightmares closing in on him.

When he got back, he would need to bring in Prince Zanac and Princess Renner before coming up with countermeasures to face that extraordinarily powerful caster.

At this rate, all of humanity would be conquered—if they were lucky. In the worst-case scenario, the human race might end up Ainz Ooal Gown’s plaything for the rest of its existence.

Someone nervously sucking their teeth was audible over the galloping horses.

“This is bad! Marquis Raeven! Veer slowly to the right! We’re being followed!”

“They don’t even seem to have eyes! How can it see us?” screamed the thief Lockmeier. “Lund, is there some kind of spell you can cast?”

“No! Do you really think any magic would work on those things, Lock?”

“We still need you to try!”

“Cut it out! We don’t have time for this! Maybe it just happens to be running this way! Marquis Raeven! Go ahead of us and veer off to the side!”

Their voices were trembling.

The marquis followed their instructions and rode at the head of the group. He veered in a direction where there weren’t many people.

From right nearby came the bleating of a dark young, the sound of

it threatening to crush his pounding heart.

“Baaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

It’s close.

His forehead became a fountain of cold sweat. He was too scared to turn around, but he thought he felt disgustingly warm air behind him.

Then he heard it again—

“Baaaaaaaaaaaaaa!”

“Fuck! It’s no good! It’s aiming right for us...! You know what to do, right, everyone?”

The response to the leader Boris’s cry was magic spells.

“Reinforce Armor!”

“Lesser Strength!”

“All right! In that case—Marquis Raeven, we’ll go to intercept it! Please just run without looking back!”

There was only one thing he could say in this situation to his men who had overcome their fear.

“...Thank you!”

“Okay! Let’s do thiiiiis!”

“Rrrraaaaagh!”

Marquis Raeven could tell from the sounds that the distance between the horses of the former orichalcum-plate adventurers behind him and his own was growing.

He ducked his head to maintain a position that would lessen the drag of the wind. He wasn’t sure how much time they could buy, but fleeing as fast as he could and making it back alive was the best way to pay respect to their faithful service.

“Fly, Fireball!”

“Impenetrable Fortress!”

As he rode at the whims of his horse, the voices of the former adventurers, who seemed to be engaging in battle, reached his ears even against the wind whipping past him.

But two seconds later, he couldn’t hear them anymore.

He could hear only the pounding of huge hooves.

His heart jolted.

He bit back a scream when he saw—in his lowered field of vision—a shadow falling across the earth.

Noticing the huge shadow over him—over him, though he fled at top speed—he grasped the fact that there was something long and thick reaching out.

“N...”

The horse galloped in a frenzy. It was already going faster than Marquis Raeven could control—it had probably never run so fast in its life. Still, the shadow remained.

“I hate this!”

It was a shriek. He hadn't even intended to scream, but it was extremely loud.

He felt something warm in his crotch.

He opened his eyes wide, but still unable to look behind him, he just kept riding.

He couldn't die yet. He didn't care what became of the kingdom. If the country was going to be destroyed, let it be destroyed.

If antagonizing Ainz Ooal Gown meant death, then he would abandon his country and flee.

How stupid.

I was so stupid.

I was a fool for coming to this battlefield.

I knew how powerful Ainz Ooal Gown was, so I should have done anything to stay in the royal capital.

I wish I hadn't given any thought to the kingdom's future.

“I hate this!”

I can't die yet.

“I ha—”

An image of a child appeared before him.

It was his adorable son.

That tiny life. He'd been gradually growing up. Sometimes he got sick. What a fuss the marquis had made then. He was mortified, thinking back, of the way he had screamed, half-mad, at his bewildered wife.

Those chubby hands and rosy cheeks. He would surely grow into a young man who would be spoken of throughout the kingdom. The marquis was sure the boy would surpass him. He had already caught glimpses of his potential.

His wife said he was biased as a parent, but that was definitely not the case.

He was so deeply grateful to his wife for bearing his precious child, although he was ashamed to say it too often.

He had even been thinking of having another.

He shouldn't have come to this battlefield. He should have stayed where he could hold those two in his arms—

“Huh?”

The pounding of the hooves stopped.

When Marquis Raeven turned around, more out of curiosity than bravery, he saw the dark young had ceased moving, as if they were

frozen.

3

With no idea where he was, he felt he had been plunged into a world of nightmares.

“The Four”—that title of the Baharuth Empire’s strongest warriors—seemed surprisingly superficial now.

He’d been so proud of it; what a puny, pathetic creature that made him. That was how great a shock he had received.

Nimble could hear muffled crying. They were the sobs of those whose fear and anxiety had broken their limits. They were the mournful cries of children—no, men who had regressed to children. The ones crying were imperial knights. Tons of them.

He heard someone pleading, “Run!”

These were the solemn wishes of those who felt horrible for the ones swallowed up in that crucible—the gruesome slaughter taking place before their eyes.

The kingdom had met such tragedy that their enemies, the imperial knights, were praying for them.

Hoping that even one more might escape.

They had come to kill one another. But faced with such brutal slaughter, any human would be moved to compassion. Anyone who didn’t feel something in this situation was a heartless brute, not a human.

And Nimble and the other knights realized this was not merely a fire on the far shore.

If they thought about the situation in terms of kingdom and empire, the fire was indeed on the other side. But if one thought in terms of humans and monsters, the fire was undoubtedly close.

The imperial knights thought of the kingdom soldiers as fellow humans, shedding tears at the tragedy they endured.

“All right, I guess now’s good.”

Reacting to Ainz’s low voice, all eyes focused on him.

With sixty thousand men gathered, he hadn’t been loud enough for those at the edges to hear. But they could tell that the man next to them had turned his head. And since they knew that Ainz Ooal Gown was on the other end of that gaze, it was only logical to follow suit and look—because everyone was terrified of his every move, for Ainz Ooal Gown was the father of this nightmare.

Ainz slowly removed his mask.

A white skull with neither skin nor flesh peered out.

Outside of this situation, they might have thought he was wearing a mask beneath his mask. But it hit Nimble, and probably all the imperial knights, like a ton of bricks.

This was his real face. Ainz Ooal Gown was a monster.

They could accept it because their instincts already told them that a human could never wield so much power.

Ainz slowly opened his arms. Like he was going to hug a friend, like a demon spreading its wings. It felt like he had expanded to double his size.

Stillness. Ainz's gentle voice was bizarrely loud against the backdrop of the distant kingdom soldiers' screams.

"Applaud."

Nimble stared at Ainz, agape, wondering what he could possibly be talking about.

It seemed that everyone within earshot felt the same way, and as Ainz's word was passed on in whispers, the number of eyes on him grew.

While everyone simply trained their eyes on him, Ainz spoke again.

"Applaud my supreme might."

The first one to clap was the one standing on the other side of Ainz from Nimble, Mare. As if that woke everyone up, a scattering of applause turned into a thunderous roar.

Of course, it wasn't genuine.

None of them wanted to clap for someone who orchestrated such a cruel slaughter. That wasn't war but a massacre. A massacre of unimaginable scale.

But there wasn't anyone who could say that.

The thunderous applause was a manifestation of the knights' fear.

It didn't seem possible for it to grow any louder, but they raised the voltage another few notches—because one of the black goats slowly changed course.

It was facing the imperial army.

Along with the clapping came cheers like a war cry.

The screams of the imperial knights in praise of Ainz Ooal Gown practically brought blood streaming from their throats.

But the black goat's feet didn't stop.

So the knights raised their voices even higher, thinking that it wasn't stopping because their voices hadn't satisfied him.

But it didn't stop.

That's when they snapped.

Who knows who moved first? It might have just been that one of the knights shuddered. But the fear that had been poured into them

readily burst.

“Eyaaaaaaaagh!”

Wails from the depths of their souls could be heard here and there around the imperial camp; the army was shaken.

Terrified by the crisis of one of the monsters that had overrun the kingdom’s army now closing in on them, some knights abandoned their paralyzed horses and made a run for it. They had just been given a glimpse of hell. No matter how feeble their imaginations, each person thought that he would be next.

The terror was contagious.

At first, there had been only a hundred or so runners, but their number increased by the second, and soon it had expanded to sixty thousand.

Yes.

The imperial army as a whole fell into a frightened panic, and its discipline collapsed.

It was an ugly rout.

Naturally, the knights had been taught how to withdraw properly. But they didn’t have the composure to maintain discipline. In order to get away even one second faster, in order to get even one step closer to safety, they shoved their friends out of their way with all their might and ran.

If someone was pushed from behind, he couldn’t avoid losing his balance and falling. And if someone fell, the ones fleeing in terror behind him weren’t about to give him time to stand up.

Those who fell were crushed under the feet of the next men.

The imperial enemy was racking up casualties not at their enemy’s hand but at their own.

Nimble was at his wit’s end. He had no idea what to do.

He wanted to run like everyone else, but he wouldn’t be permitted to do that. Plus, not all the knights had run away.

When he surveyed the position, there were a handful of men still on their horses, unmoving.

It wasn’t that they were too scared to run. They were thrilled to witness overwhelming power that humans could never hope to achieve.

If a normal person saw a huge tornado heading straight for them, they would immediately try to get away. But others, despite knowing they would get killed, would be struck by the tornado’s beauty and rendered immobile. The ones remaining were that sort of heretic.

When the dark young arrived before Ainz, it bent its legs and lowered its tentacles. It must have been showing respect.

The monster’s un-monsterlike pose made a twitching grin appear on Nimble’s face.

The young should have been spattered in blood, but the reason it didn't appear to be was that its skin had absorbed everything.

Ainz sat on one of the tentacles, and several more reached down to stabilize and lift him up. The monster put him on its head.

"The plan was for me to hit them with one spell and then for the imperial army to charge, but it doesn't look like that's going to happen."

Nimble didn't say a word.

It was true. The empire had broken the contract proposed by the king of its ally.

But he couldn't very well chew out the knights who had lost their nerve. He would probably defend their actions even before Jircniv. That was how overpowering the fear had been.

"Oh, I'm not blaming you. I can understand assuming that if you had charged you might have been trampled along with them. If something like that had happened, I never would have been able to explain it to the emperor. So, well, I'll work hard enough for both of us."

Nimble glanced at the undead standing at attention.

"A-are you going to send in those undead forces?"

"Nah, I summoned these goats, after all, so I'll leave it up to them and just do a little cleanup. Mare, don't drop your guard, though."

"N-no, sir! You can count on me, Lord Ainz!"

Nimble was stunned.

There was going to be a follow-up attack. By the one who could use such devastating magic himself.

He could see an insatiable appetite for slaughter, the sort where this caster didn't plan to let anyone leave this battlefield alive.

"How can I put this...? Haven't you done enough? Are you a demon?"

He meant to whisper it, but his voice came out much louder than expected, and Ainz, atop the black goat, turned his horrible face toward Nimble.

As Nimble inwardly trembled in terror, Ainz shook his head.

"Don't misunderstand. I'm an undead."

He was explaining that he wasn't an evil-doing demon but a life-hating undead. That was why he wouldn't let a single kingdom soldier escape—to take more lives.

It made sense, but it was also the worst reply possible.

If Ainz was slaughtering the living because he was an undead, then there was a perfectly good possibility that he would turn next on the empire, another nation of the living.

No, that was a future that would surely come to pass.

Wondering what to do, under assault by confusion and fear, and

lacking concentration, Nimble missed the last thing Ainz murmured.

“...Seems like we found who we were looking for.”

•

Ramposa III's position was at the rearmost area of the kingdom's army where countless nobles' flags fluttered.

Until a little while ago, there had been a great many nobles around, but few remained. Most of them had fled, and those left could be counted very quickly. He wasn't angry at the court nobles for running away.

“You should leave me and run, too!”

“You jest, Your Majesty! Please escape as fast as you can. If one of those comes, no one can save you!” It was the vice-captain of the Royal Select who gave the suggestion.

“Escape and do what?”

“Your Majesty, even if you remain here, there's nothing for you to do. Return to E-Rantel—that's where the counterattack will begin, don't you think?”

Ramposa III smiled wryly. The suggestion grated on his ear. “You have one thing right. There's definitely nothing I can do here.”

Under the circumstances, he wouldn't be able to rally the broken, routed army. And it wasn't just him—it would be next to impossible no matter how great the commander.

“Your Majesty! There's no time left! Men, get him out of here even if you have to tie him up!”

Gazef's subordinates leaped into action.

Having decided that pointlessly remaining any longer would only endanger both his life and the lives of the others, Ramposa III stood up.

“All right. I'll go. But do you really think we'll get away if we run now?”

The earthquake-like footfalls were growing rapidly closer. Even in such a crisis, Ramposa III's tone was calm. It couldn't even be compared to the chaotic voices of the nobles who had been there up until moments before.

“It has to be impossible. If we try to escape on horseback, they'll definitely give chase. They seem to be prioritizing attacks on people running in large groups, so this is the only chance we have.”

Ramposa III realized that was why they had put a whole mass of nobles on their horses and packed them off earlier.

“So you will run and escape.”

He saw that a handful of the warriors had removed their armor and cast it aside.

“These men will carry Your Majesty to safety.”

“What about you?”

Not all the men had taken off their armor. The vice-captain and others were still wearing theirs.

“We’re going to distract them by fleeing on our horses in the opposite direction.”

Ramposa III understood the warriors’ feelings from the beautiful smiles on their faces.

“No! You’re our country’s treasures! Do whatever you must to survive! I need you to serve my successor!”

“Of course. We’re going to act as bait, but we don’t intend to die!”

That was a lie. They did intend to die. No, they knew their fate was death.

Ramposa III tried to persuade them, but the words wouldn’t come out. Seeing their smiles, he felt like anything he said could only scratch the surface.

The surrounding warriors began to remove Ramposa III’s armor.

A warrior in white armor stepped forward. It was Climb, who had exerted himself thus far as the only subordinate of the king’s daughter, Princess Renner.

“I’ll also act as a diversion. I don’t know if those monsters have eyes or not, but if I wave a flag, maybe I can catch their attention. This armor makes for a good target, as well.”

Climb had the kingdom’s flag in his hands. The dirty footprints from where fleeing soldiers had stepped on it hinted at how dire their situation was.

“Agh. Then I’ll go with you.”

Brain Unglaus stood next to him. Ramposa III’s most trusted aide, Gazef Stronoff, said the man was a warrior equal to himself. Brain had joined this battle on behalf of Renner. He was essentially in the same category as Climb.

“Are you sure? You aren’t even a true subordinate of the princess.”

“What’s that now? Well, don’t worry about it. I jumped onto the front line during the demon disturbance and lived. I’ll just pray good luck comes my way again. And I’ll pray for you, too!”

“The gods won’t give up on us. They sent us a hero during the demon disturbance. I believe they’ll bring us good luck again this time.”

Brain and the vice-captain fist-bumped in front of Ramposa III and went their separate ways.

“How horrible...”

Where did I go wrong?

Ramposa III groaned. Probably none of the warriors before his

eyes would survive.

The vice-captain and Climb would die as bait.

And what would become of Gazef, who rode off to stop the dark young?

His eyes grew hot.

He wanted to say, *Forgive me*.

They were throwing away their lives, their futures, to distract the enemy from an old man.

But there was no way he could say such a thing.

Though resigned to their deaths, they intended to struggle.

In that case...

"Return safely to E-Rantel. You'll have whatever you wish as a reward."

Climb and Brain had started walking but turned around.

"I don't need a reward, Your Majesty. Princess Renner saved me. I couldn't possibly ask for anything more..."

"My wish is for you to give my favorite kid in the kingdom the most beautiful princess as his bride."

"...Ha-ha-ha. That's quite a reward you're asking for."

"Brain, what are you saying?!"

"I would have to start by giving that kid a peerage. Well, let's work hard!"

"Now you really have to live through this and make it back, huh, Climb?"

Climb just blinked furiously with his mouth hanging open, his warrior's determination of a moment ago vanished.

Ramposa III forgot everything and smiled merrily in spite of himself.

"Now then, Your Majesty."

"I'm counting on you."

Ramposa III's armor had been removed, so the warriors picked him up.

"Your Majesty. Whether we can escape like this or not will depend on luck. If anything should... Well, please forgive us."

"That's fine. I decided to use your idea. If our luck is bad, then there's no helping it."

"All right, Your Majesty! See you in E-Rantel!"

The vice-captain and the others rode off on their horses. As if it had been waiting for that cue, the dark young changed directions.

"Okay! Let's go while everyone is drawing its attention!"

Among the turmoil of panicked soldiers, Gazef gazed steadily ahead and drew the kingdom's treasure, Razor Edge. He always won when he unsheathed this sword with its icy gleam. One could say the sword was proof of Gazef's victories.

But today, it looked awfully feeble.

Gazef was just so small compared to the huge dark young making a beeline for him.

"If you get past me, you'll reach the king's position. Don't mind if I stop you here," Gazef said with a smile. A self-deprecating grin.

Gazef had no chance of winning against the monster. Stopping it for so much as a second would be admirable—even for the captain of the Royal Select, the warrior whose name was known in all the nearby countries. Even for a man like him.

"Take the king and run. Lay down your lives, if necessary."

Gazef gave orders to men who weren't present—his subordinates—as if he was praying. He had left the kingdom's strongest soldiers behind to guard the king. Of course they would succeed in protecting him from the savagery of those monsters. Even if they gave their lives, probably the most they could accomplish was to take a single attack as a meat shield.

But that actually did mean success.

If they took a hit, they would probably die, but if they could get their opponent to waste even one blow, then the king would live longer. It even became possible to hope that maybe, with eighty meat shields...

"Sorry."

With his eyes fixed on the monster, which scattered blood and flesh as it rapidly approached, Gazef apologized to his men. They weren't with him, but he knew that even if he had told them directly, it would have been only for self-satisfaction. Still, he would have hated to die without saying it.

Gazef exhaled sharply, feeling the ground shake beneath him.

Then he held up the sword gripped tightly in his hand.

How tenuous his blade seemed against the hulking form crushing humans as it closed in.

If it had been a runaway carriage, he would have been able to stop it, no problem. If it had been a pouncing tiger, he could have dodged and immediately cut its head off.

But he didn't have much of a chance of surviving a dark young.

He exhaled deeply, and at the same time the flow of the people around him changed dramatically. Up until a moment ago, it had been a confused torrent, but now they parted around him. They essentially created a straight path between him and the dark young.

Stomping more and more people apart beneath its feet, the dark

young drew nearer.

With his sword up, Gazef observed its entire body. Where could he attack that would be most effective?

He used the martial art Detect Weak Point.

But...

“No weak spots?”

Did that mean it really had no weaknesses or that the gap between their abilities was so great that they couldn’t be read? Gazef didn’t know.

But he didn’t lose hope. That outcome was within the realm of the expected.

He used another martial art.

It was a fairly big move, an ability that could be explained as a boost to the user’s sixth sense: Possibility Perception.

The difference in their physical abilities was so great that even if he boosted his physical strength, he would close the gap only slightly. Instead, he figured it would be better to rely on something else—his sixth sense.

“C’m on, monster.”

As if the dark young heard his voice and listened, it headed straight for Gazef. The distance between them shrank before his eyes.

Let’s be honest.

Gazef was scared.

If it would have been permissible, he would have rather run away with the other soldiers.

Even with Possibility Perception, he didn’t sense anything. It was like being hurled into a completely black night.

Once the dark young was closer, he could observe its condition in detail.

Given the lack of scratches on its hooves, it was possible a mere sword wouldn’t be enough to cut it. Considering how deep the earth was dented when stomped, it was definitely enough weight to be instantly fatal.

The better he understood the monster, the stronger his fear grew.

Gazef was experiencing greater fear than all the panicked soldiers running around.

But he wouldn’t show his back.

The strongest warrior in the kingdom couldn’t run away. He deactivated Possibility Perception and steadied his breathing.

The dark young was nearly upon him.

It was close enough that the dirt it was kicking up reached him. It ignored the other soldiers as if they were bugs by the side of the road

and dashed on a crash course toward Gazef.

But they didn't crash.

The dark young's body twisted as if it had hit a wall, and it moved to go around Gazef. It happened so suddenly the monster's gait was thrown off, and even though it had an extra leg, it still nearly lost its balance.

Gazef didn't think for a minute that it had run from him on its own.

Perhaps it had simply gone toward an area where there was more prey; it must have thought that by shifting its course to the side it could trample more prey.

Shaking the ground as it ran, the dark young passed by Gazef.

Because it went by only about a yard away, the ground beneath his feet shook as if he was in a huge earthquake. If it was anyone besides Gazef, they would probably have fallen down.

He focused on the dark young's big hooves as it tried to run away and—

“Yahh!”

—swung his sword. If it was running away so fast, it meant its own speed would turn into a slashing weapon.

The moment blade met hoof, a tremendous shock went through his sword hand. It was so strong he thought his arm might come off.

Stomping legs left two trails in the dirt as they receded.

“Nnnngh!”

Though he had avoided having his sword being ripped out of his hand, a sharp pain ran through his arm. The stress must have injured either his muscle or his tendon.

With ragged breath, he scowled at the hulking form behind him.

Not too far from Gazef, the dark young stopped for the first time since it had begun its rampage.

A single tentacle overshadowed him.

Fear pierced his entire body. Gazef promptly held his sword up.

That instant an incredible shock was transmitted through his sword, and his whole body lifted into the air.

Gazef couldn't see anything, but he figured he must have been swiped aside by the tentacle. He flew quite a distance.

After an unbelievably long time in the air, Gazef fell to the ground—and rolled more than a few times. But it wasn't the rolling of a corpse that had been thrown but of a thrown human actively trying to slow his momentum.

Whipping his creaking body, he slowly stood up. He glared at the now farther off dark young.

Just one blow.

His hand was broken. That his sword wasn't broken was surely

thanks to sheer luck.

All emotion had drained out of Gazef's face.

Why was I spared? Why didn't it attack again?

Had it decided he wasn't a worthy opponent? That seemed the most likely explanation.

It wasn't a crushing defeat. He hadn't even been able to get anywhere near.

Crimson blood flowed from the lip he was biting.

Then he suppressed the mounting pain and desperately took off running.

Even if he couldn't win, even if he could take only one more hit, he had to protect the king.

But the feet he had moved so resolutely stopped after only a few paces, because when he saw another dark young coming—there was no mistake—toward him, he realized why his life had been spared.

There was a king sitting on a throne of tentacles above the dark young. But there was something strange about his face. It was all bone, and Gazef had no doubt this was a type of monster called an undead.

He wasn't such a fool that he couldn't understand who the king was.

“Ainz Ooal Gown...sir... So you weren't human, I see.”

The special unit from the Theocracy... Gazef had no trouble understanding that the being who handily annihilated an opponent that had been impossible for him was not human.

I see. Why would a being with that much power be human? Why was I even thinking that?

“Sir Stronoff!”

He knew from the hoarse voice who it was before even turning around. Two familiar faces were running toward him.

“You guys are all right, then!”

Climb and Brain didn't seem to be injured, either. Climb's white armor wasn't even dirty. They hadn't scrambled to flee, so they must have been extraordinarily lucky.

“More than anything, I'm glad to see you're all right.”

“I didn't think we would die, and we didn't! But I guess it's not over yet, huh?”

Both of their gazes settled on what Gazef had been looking at until a moment ago.

“What in the world...?”

“There can only be one of those, Climb—a monster who could tame those monsters. That's Ainz Ooal Gown.”

“That... That's...? How... I-I'm sorry.”

Looking over, he saw Climb was trembling.

The tense look on the boy's face told him the shivers weren't from excitement.

"Don't worry, Climb. It's nothing to be ashamed of. I mean, shit! He's the third ultra-powerful being now! What the hell has been going on with my life lately?"

Brain got into a fighting stance, exuding an overpowering swordsman spirit.

Gazef wondered just a bit about his content expression, though, because it seemed out of place.

"I—I can't run away, either!"

Climb and Brain stood on either side of Gazef.

Squelching through chunks of scattered flesh, the dark young walked right up to Gazef.

Screams could be heard in the distance, but this place was quiet.

It was almost like this area had been cut away from the rest of the world.

Ainz's gaze went from Gazef, uninterestedly to Brain, and then stopped on Climb for a moment. Then he shrugged and turned back to Gazef.

"...You seem well, Sir Stronoff."

"You seem well, too, Sir Gown...heh-heh. Or can I say 'well'? It would be rude if you ceased being human since the last time we met."

"Ha-ha-ha. I haven't changed since then." Ainz chuckled and hopped off the dark young. Probably due to some sort of magic, gravity didn't seem to pull him so much, and he fell slowly.

At first, Gazef thought it might be the Fly spell that everyone knew of, but when he considered that it was this great caster using it, he felt there was a good chance it was a higher-tier spell he had never heard of.

"It really has been a while, Sir Stronoff. Since back at Carne."

"Indeed, Sir Gown. So...whatever can I do for you? I'm sure it can't just be that you happened to spot an acquaintance on the battlefield and came over to say hello."

"Well, hmm. I don't like using flowery language, and a roundabout phrasing wouldn't be appropriate here. So...I'll tell you straight."

Ainz slowly extended a bony hand.

Not out of hostility but out of friendship.

"Come work for me."

For a moment, Gazef's eyes widened.

At the same time, he heard Climb and Brain gasp on either side of him.

He never thought this great caster would say such a thing to him.

"If you agree to come work for me..." Ainz snapped his fingers,

although it wasn't clear how, with his skeleton hand.

Unsure what was about to happen to him, Gazef trembled.

But nothing about him changed physically or mentally, and he didn't feel anything.

"Look around."

Gazef surveyed the area. As expected, nothing was—

"Aha. So you stopped them?"

All of the dark young had ceased moving. With their legs raised mid-stomp, they looked like statues.

"This is temporary. What happens next depends on your answer. If you refuse, I'll give the young I summoned another order. I'm sure you can guess what it will be without my telling you."

Gazef blinked.

Even if he took Gazef hostage and forced him to work under him, Gazef would do more than lack loyalty—he would be sure to plot a betrayal from the inside. Gazef didn't think Ainz could have overlooked that.

So there had to be some other reason he would ask such a thing.

Gazef didn't understand.

But there had to be a reason that a being of that power, who could control a corps of monsters, would want him.

"What? Gazef Stronoff, come work for me."

The bony hand was there, extended.

If he took that hand, many lives would be saved.

Gazef's heart wavered—because he had been given a chance to save the people of the kingdom.

But he couldn't take that hand.

This decision is wrong.

It's only for my own satisfaction.

A hundred out of a hundred people would be sure to call him a damn fool.

But Gazef still couldn't betray the kingdom.

He emphatically shook his head.

"I refuse. His Majesty has favored me, and for that, I owe him. Thus, my sword belongs to the king. I cannot yield it to you."

"Even if more of his subjects die as a result? You engaged in battle prepared to give your life to save Carne... Now that same man would abandon lives he could save?"

The words cut Gazef's heart like a knife.

Still, Gazef Stronoff could not take the hand of Ainz Ooal Gown.

The captain of the Royal Select couldn't betray the kingdom.

That was Gazef's loyalty.

Perhaps irritated by his silence, Ainz shrugged. "You're a foolish man. Well, then—"

Without letting Ainz say anything else, Gazef pointed Razor Edge at him.

“—What?”

His wounds from the goat hadn't completely healed even with the power of the talisman he was using.

But that wasn't why the tip of his sword was shaking. Even so, Gazef was gushing fighting energy from his entire body.

“Sir Gown, I apologize for this impudence as someone in your debt, but...I challenge thee to a duel.”

Ainz's face had neither skin nor flesh. Since Gazef couldn't know what expression he was making, it was impossible to read what he was thinking.

But he had the feeling somehow that he was dumbstruck. And apparently the other two behind him were, too. Even if no one spoke, their shock was palpable.

“.....Are you serious?”

“Of course.”

“.....You'll die, you know.”

“I'm sure I will.”

“And yet you still...? I wasn't really planning on killing you...so you have a death wish?”

“Well, I didn't think so, but here we are.”

“...What are you thinking? I can't understand your thought process. If you were challenging me because you knew you could win, I would get it. And in the case that you thought you had a chance. But you're convinced you'll lose... Have you lost the ability to make sane decisions?”

“The enemy king has come within reach of my sword. I think it's only a matter of course that I would try to take his head.”

“Certainly, we are in close physical proximity. But it also looks like there's an insurmountable gap between us. Are you calling me blind?”

One of the tentacles of the dark young behind Ainz whipped out and gouged the ground next to Gazef.

With Gazef's dynamic visual acuity, he couldn't even see it happen.

“Maybe I am, Sir Gown.”

“Are you getting cocky because I said I wouldn't kill you?”

Gazef smiled deep down. “I certainly don't intend to be, not one bit. I just want to do what I should as captain of the Royal Select, that's all.”

“...If you come at me, I will mercilessly destroy you. That's a

fact.”

“I bet it is.”

“Hmm... So I can say all that, and you won’t change your mind? What a shame. As a collector, I’d rather not kill a rare one like you.”

Gazef didn’t have the slightest intention of backing down.

This was a one-in-a-million chance. For starters, Ainz had so many subordinates, yet here he was in front of Gazef with no entourage.

On top of that, he was so arrogant in his strength that he wasn’t even moving to use the dark young behind him.

A chance like this would never come again.

His opponent was at unreachable heights. But here and now, this was the moment that reaching him might be possible.

The next time they met, he would surely be surrounded by a crowd of guards, as befitted a caster who would be vulnerable in a close-quarters battle. He would never stand within a sword’s reach. That was why Gazef challenged him to a duel.

There was also one other reason.

It would be betting on a very slim chance, but it was worth a shot.

Gazef declared his intentions formally. “King of Darkness, Ainz Ooal Gown! I am captain of the Royal Select of the Re-Estize Kingdom, Gazef Stronoff! And I challenge thee to a duel!”

“Gazef!!”

“Captain...”

Finally unable to stand it any longer, Brain screamed and Climb moaned. But Gazef paid them no mind and continued.

“If you accept them, King of Darkness, I would like to designate these two as the witnesses of our single combat.”

Ainz shrugged.

Gazef took it as permission to do as he liked and nodded.

“W-wait! Wait, Gazef! I would die with you any day! I won’t let you go alone! Your Majesty, King of Darkness, I beg you! I realize this is impertinent, but it’s a wish from my heart! Would you fight us both at the same time? I’m sure it wouldn’t be difficult for you.”

Hearing Brain’s miserable screams, Gazef thought, *Yeah, I knew it.*

Brain’s content expression earlier was that of a warrior who had made up his mind.

He had resolved to be killed with Gazef by Ainz Ooal Gown.

But Gazef wouldn’t accept that. He couldn’t.

“Brain Unglaus! You would sully my warrior’s resolve?”

Brain looked shocked.

“Listen, Sir Stronoff. I don’t mind fighting both of you.”

“That won’t be necessary, King of Darkness. I am your sole opponent. You needn’t lay a hand on either of them.”

The red flames in the vacant orbits of Ainz’s skull gleamed

brighter.

“...I see. I’ve seen those eyes before. You have the will of a man who is ready to die. They’re strong eyes. I admire them.” Ainz spoke as if he was another human. “All right. I accept your proposal. You and me in a one-on-one PvP match.”

Brain fell to his knees.

Gazef couldn’t see his lowered face, but raindrops were falling onto the red earth.

I’m sorry, he mentally said to him.

“I’ll give you back your corpse in pristine condition. You can use Resurrection and—”

“No need.”

At Gazef’s reply, both friends and foe were speechless.

“I don’t wish to be resurrected. I don’t mind if you throw my body away here.”

He didn’t think there was anything wrong with resurrection magic. But he didn’t like it.

A person had only one life to live.

That’s why the decision people made to risk their lives carried such weight.

And it wouldn’t be in the kingdom’s interests for him to come back to life, either.

If Gazef died, it would be announced both internally and externally that the king had lost someone precious to him. That might soften the anger directed at him by his subjects who lost someone in the war.

This was the selfishly operating captain of the Royal Select’s final act of loyalty.

Ignoring the surprise around him, Gazef smiled, seemingly liberated.

“Then let us begin... You two, watch my last fight all the way to the end.”

Climb never imagined Brain would ever show such vulnerability.

The Brain that Climb knew was strong, easygoing, and elusive. But the man hanging his head held not even a shadow of him. Still, Climb didn’t think he was weak.

“Brain. Aren’t you going to do that for me?” Gazef asked without turning around.

Brain didn’t move. Climb could sense his frustration from the way his hands clutched at the dirt. Still, he couldn’t not say it. “It’s what Sir Stronoff wants.”

He didn't think Gazef Stronoff could win.

That's why Climb and Brain had to fulfill Gazef's wish.

Brain slowly stood up.

So much heat.

Climb nearly skittered back.

Brain seemed to be giving off a fiery warmth.

"...I've acted pathetic in front of you so many times, Climb. I'm all right now. I'm going to burn his heroic figure into my eyes."

"Thank you."

What was the relationship between Gazef Stronoff and Brain Unglaus?

Climb didn't know. Especially about Brain.

He lost to Gazef and trained hard with the sword. That was the Brain that Climb knew, but he had the feeling their relationship wasn't so simple.

"Very well, Sir Stronoff. May I see your sword? I'd like to examine it briefly," Ainz said with utter calm as if he was inquiring about the day's weather. Enchanted swords were invested with all sorts of abilities. To examine it was to examine the hand of one's opponent. Common sense dictated it was not the sort of proposition that should be accepted.

Climb wasn't the only one to think that; apparently, Brain felt the same, because his eyes went huge when he saw what happened next.

Gazef turned his sword 180 degrees and offered the hilt to Ainz.

"Gazef! Have you lost all interest in winning?"

"Brain! Don't be rude! The King of Darkness isn't that sort of person."

Ainz took the sword and cast a spell. Then he smiled in high spirits.

"This sword's amazing." Ainz did what Gazef had done moments ago and offered him the hilt. "Sir Stronoff, how much do you know about that sword's power?"

"I know everything. This sword is so impossibly sharp, it can cut gold like paper."

"What a pity. That's only the first thing it can do."

"What? What in the world do you mean, King of Darkness?"

"In a word, it's a sword that can kill me. With that, we meet the basic criteria of having a duel. If I fought against someone who was wielding a weapon that couldn't even scratch me, it'd be nothing but an execution.

"How rude of me to have lumped you in with the sewer rats who barged into my home...", Ainz said as he suddenly pulled a dagger out of the air.

Without a moment's hesitation, he pressed the dazzling blade hard

against his face and dragged it across.

But it didn't seem to hurt him at all.

"These kinds of things enchanted with weak magic can't hurt me. Incidentally, the amount of dat—mana is the same as that sword you have, Sir Stronoff. But that sword makes all that possible. It ignores all the common sense I know. I wonder, if I win, would you mind if I took it?"

Gazef winced. "Give me a break. This sword is one of the kingdom's treasures."

"Hmm. So this is a PvP match where we'll return any drops. Fine with me."

"I appreciate it, King of Darkness."

After returning the sword, Ainz rubbed his chin pensively and then began taking steps away from Gazef one by one, as if measuring.

"This should be a relative distance of about five yards. Other than that...we don't have a countdown, so we'll need a signal. You with the white armor. Come up with some sort of start signal."

Suddenly getting called on, Climb shuddered.

"I'm counting on you, Climb."

"W-well, I have my magic handbells, so how about if I rang one of those?"

The two combatants silently nodded to show they accepted Climb's suggestion.

Gazef aimed the point of his sword at Ainz's eyes and filled his body with energy. To Climb, behind him, it seemed like his muscles were actually expanding.

His swordsman spirit was overwhelming. Climb had never seen the true force of the captain of the Royal Select. But the way he looked now seemed like a mirage, bizarrely distant and fleeting.

"Sir Stronoff..."

This was probably the last time he would see him alive.

"You don't know that for sure."

"Huh?!"

Brain suddenly contradicted him.

"It's not a done deal that Gazef'll die. It's extremely slim, but he does have a chance at winning. He has an ace move."

"You mean Sixfold Slash of Light?"

Brain smiled calmly. "No, it's the ultimate martial art, way beyond that. He has that, so..."

"I—I had no idea!"

Readying his handbell, Climb gazed at Gazef from the side as the warrior, with his sword up, focused every fiber of his being—the steely profile of the man known in the surrounding countries as the captain of the Royal Select.

“Yeah. One of the kingdom’s former adamantite-plate adventurers, Vesture Kloff Di Laufen, developed it, but he was too old to use it. If my strongest move, Nail Clipper, is the combination of multiple arts used at once, Gazef’s is the strongest single art. With that...he might be able to reach even Ainz Ooal Gown.”

That might be why he chose to face him solo, Brain thought as he watched in earnest, unblinking.

Climb gulped.

The hand holding his bell felt heavy. Once the bell rang, Gazef’s fate would be decided.

“Want me to do it instead?”

“...Thank you, but...I’ll...”

Brain murmured that he understood and didn’t say anything else.

Climb held up the bell—with a prayer that Gazef would win.

And then...the bell rang out even louder than he expected.

Focused to the extreme, Gazef dashed forward with unimaginable speed—

Climb and Brain were determined not to blink, their eyes opened wide—

—but even faster than that, the world stopped.

“Oh... You really need a way to handle time.”

He had used Instacast Silent Magic: Stop Time, so Gazef was frozen in front of Ainz with his sword raised over his head.

When time was frozen, all attacks were meaningless. Even if he hit Gazef with attack magic, he wouldn’t be able to do any damage. That’s why Ainz calculated out the times and cast.

“Delay Magic: True Death.”

It was a tier-nine spell.

He didn’t use it much because Grasp Heart was so easy and fun.

If magic was ineffective while time was stopped, all one had to do was cast in a way that the magic took effect right after the temporal magic expired. It was a basic combo, but because of how difficult it was to get the timing right, only about 5 percent of magic-using classes could pull it off.

It goes without saying, but after spending a ridiculous amount of time practicing, Ainz could do it.

“...This is good-bye, Gazef Stronoff. I didn’t dislike you.”

The spell was lifted, and time returned to the world.

And before anything else happened, the magic took effect.

Gazef fell in slow motion.

“Huh?!”

“Wh-what?”

Climb and Brain had no idea what had happened.

The moment Gazef dashed forward, he began to crumple.

Ainz caught his body.

His sword dropped feebly to the ground.

The duel was already decided.

But they couldn’t understand it.

They had absolutely no idea what had occurred.

“What in the...?”

“You think I know?” Brain roared. “Why?! Stand up, Gazef!”

But Brain’s wish was coldly denied.

“He’s already dead.”

Ainz laid Gazef on the ground with correct etiquette, as if he respected him. Then he slowly closed his eyes, which had been popped wide open.

The other two came closer, and with his eyes on Gazef’s face, Ainz spoke to them.

“...Seeing him take on a fight he couldn’t possibly win reminded me of that one time... Out of respect for the captain, I won’t have the dark young attack anymore... After I make up his body, I’ll send it to you.”

“...No, you don’t need to do that. We’ll take him back. I don’t want any favors from you.”

Climb breathed a sigh of relief.

He thought Brain might challenge Ainz even though he knew he couldn’t win, but it didn’t seem like that was going to happen.

Ainz just said, “Oh,” and abruptly straightened up. “You can’t resurrect someone from the instadeath spell I used, True Death, with a low-level resurrection spell. Also, tell the people of the kingdom: If you submit to me, I will have mercy on you.”

Ainz floated into the air.

He showed them his unprotected back, but neither Brain nor Climb could do anything as shameless as attacking him.

Ainz sat on the dark young’s tentacles.

It was like a horrific throne.

“If you turn over the E-Rantel area soon, these fellows won’t rampage through the royal capital. Tell that to the king.”

The dark young whirled around and headed back toward the imperial army’s position, although the imperial army itself seemed to have started withdrawing at some point. The other four also seemed to be making their way back.

“Climb, I have one favor to ask you... Do you mind if I take Gazef

back?”

“...All right. I'll take his sword.”

“So many people died.”

“I wonder how many.”

“...What is going on?”

“I don't know. But if a being like that is going to rule this land...”

“There will definitely be another war in the future... And the casualties will probably be even greater next time.”

Following behind Brain, who had shouldered Gazef, Climb thought of the kingdom's gloomy future.

He felt like Brain's prediction was undoubtedly right. What mattered, then, was what he should do in that situation. And what he was even capable of doing.

And most importantly of all...

I have to at least secure Princess Renner's future...

Climb balled his fists tightly and made up his mind. He would do anything to protect his master.

Epilogue

Epilogue

A freezing evening wind blew by.

Brain Unglaus's hair whipped in it, and his clothes flapped.

"Brr."

His white breath and low murmur were scattered and carried away by a northerly gust.

He felt like he was going to freeze to his core.

Brain was alone atop the rampart tower the three of them had climbed before, deploying.

There was nothing there but darkness.

In the battle on Katze Plain—no, the massacre—a huge number of the kingdom's people had died.

He remembered running from the battlefield for dear life.

The people who had fled looked so pitiful and ragged, their gaits unsteady.

Even Brain, who had fought through many life-and-death battles, would never be able to forget the hellish scene caused by that single caster.

Despite its walls, E-Rantel couldn't be called safe, but the soldiers who somehow managed to make it this far practically collapsed with fatigue, falling into a deep slumber.

Up in the empty rampart tower, Brain exhaled deeply once again.

Then he silently looked up at the sky.

"Man...I kind of don't care about anything anymore."

He looked at his hands.

The weight of that man's lifeless body still hadn't left him. Even if he tried to forget it, he couldn't.

He had been a great warrior, as well as Brain's rival, one step ahead of him.

The loss he felt—the loss of Gazef—was tremendous.

Gazef was more to Brain than a good rival.

Because that man had stood before him in the tournament, because he broke him back when he had such a big head, because of Brain's passion to defeat Gazef someday—those were things that made

Brain the person he was now.

Brain Unglaus was birthed, raised, and trained by Gazef Stronoff. Gazef's strength was the strength that Brain was meant to spend his life trying to surpass—just as a father existed as a wall to be overcome.

But now the person he was supposed to surpass was gone.

Gazef had towered before him like a mountain to the last.

Shalltear Bloodfallen had shown Brain true strength. And for a time, he wasn't able to recover from it.

He understood now that because he had been so confident in his strength, which he had made his sole foundation, he was fragile and weak when Shalltear shattered it.

But Gazef was different.

"Ainz Ooal Gown... He must be as powerful as Shalltear Bloodfallen. Gazef stood before him and issued a challenge."

Gazef didn't take him on in single combat for some pathetic reason like surviving. His attitude had been completely different from when Brain waved his sword recklessly at Shalltear, sobbing.

Then why did he do it?

"I don't get it. Why didn't you run away?" He painfully choked out the words. "Why did you choose death?! That monster was going to let you go! You should have built up your strength! Why did you...? If I have to die, I wanted to go with you!"

If he couldn't surpass Gazef, his wish was to die beside him.

Brain looked at the weapon on his hip.

He'd been authorized to borrow Razor Edge temporarily.

Drawing the razor-sharp blade, Brain used a martial art.

"Fourfold Slash of Light."

It was the move that Gazef had used to defeat him in the tournament.

Four flashes sliced through the parapet. There was virtually no resistance; the sword was so sharp, it felt like cutting through water.

"I even learned this because of you... I admired you so much... I wanted to die together, if it was possible. Why didn't you let me fight beside you? Why didn't you tell me to die?"

Brain buried his face in his hands.

The backs of his eyes grew hot, but the tears didn't fall.

Just then, Brain heard the clacking of footsteps. He could think of only one person who would come here.

"...It's true that you get sentimental with age..."

"I don't think the sorrow of losing someone important to you has anything to do with age."

It was the hoarse voice he expected.

"...Sorry, Climb...for making you handle everything."

Brain rubbed his eyes and sheathed his sword before turning around.

Climb was standing there with a solemn expression on his face, still in his armor.

“Well, I probably wouldn’t have been much use anyhow, right? And under the circumstances, there’s probably no one trying to kill the king at the moment. So what’s the latest?”

“Since Prince Barbro still hasn’t returned, the plan is to send out a search party tomorrow.”

Apparently, since they couldn’t use soldiers, they would hire adventurers.

“Then there were no objections regarding the transfer of E-Rantel. All the nobles are in favor, and the king agreed as well.”

Apparently even the members of the king’s faction agreed.

The king’s faction had gained power after the demon disturbance. That was how they had mustered such a large army for the war, but when that army suffered a catastrophic defeat, there was major backlash. Moreover, none of the nobles would be harmed by handing over this area, which was a part of the king’s domain. If it would help them stay alive, surely they had no reason to be against the deal.

So this time, the king’s faction lost power, while the nobles’ faction grew stronger.

What would happen next?

Climb suddenly realized he was trembling.

It wasn’t anger but fear. Recalling what had happened, his fractured heart cried out, as if that absolute despair was still nearby.

“...Just remembering it all frightens me.”

Had it only been the extraordinary strength of a person in crisis?

Brain thought back to when Climb had stood beside him to fight the King of Darkness. Then he thought he might know the answer to his question.

“Hey, tell me. Why did Gazef challenge him to single combat?”

Climb looked at him questioningly. Brain wondered if he hadn’t worded it clearly enough, but before he could even open his mouth to say more, Climb spoke.

“This is purely my personal thoughts, but would that be all right with you?”

“Sure, tell me whatever you think.”

“...I think he wanted us to see.”

“...See what?”

“The power of the King of Darkness, King Ainz Ooal Gown. And... I think he wanted to create a future.”

“A future?”

“Yes. I think he wanted us to have some record, some strategy, for

the next time.”

A shocking realization struck Brain from his head to his toes like lightning.

There could be no other reason. Climb was exactly right.

The man must have risked his life to draw out even the slightest bit of intelligence. Brain didn't think the King of Darkness would accept a close-quarters battle without an entourage. But Gazef had bet on the miracle of it happening once more. And who did he want to give that possibility to?

Brain smiled self-deprecatingly. *You couldn't even manage to think that far, Brain?*

Now that I know how Gazef felt, how should I live my life?

When Climb could no longer tolerate the silence after Brain sank deep into thought, he asked, “...By the way, you aren't going to resurrect Sir Stronoff?”

“Gazef's not that sort of guy.”

And casting the spell didn't guarantee resurrection. He had heard that people who were satisfied with their life refused.

“The king won't accept that.”

“Probably not, but he's not coming back... It's strange...”

“It is. I don't understand what Sir Stronoff was thinking. I can't help but think the right thing to do would be to come back and remain loyal.”

“Oh? That's all right for you, Climb. If I die...don't resurrect me. With that dissatisfaction hanging over me...I wouldn't feel alive.”

“I would want you to resurrect me. I want to devote myself to Princess Renner until there is nothing left. Of course, only do it if you can afford it.”

There was only one caster in the kingdom who could use resurrection magic. She would probably charge an astronomical—and fair—price to bring someone back.

She made a special exception for the demon disturbance, since all the adventurers had formed a team, but usually resurrection required quite a lot of gold. It was an eye-popping sum that a commoner or soldier could save for all their lives and still never have enough. That applied to Climb as well.

Brain didn't speak his thoughts aloud—that the princess would probably pay for it. His only reply was, “I see.”

Another silence descended, and this time Brain broke it.

“I wanted to defeat him...”

Climb didn't say anything. And Brain didn't want him to. Even if he told Climb the whole story, it wouldn't matter. But for some reason, he wanted to spit it out, something that had been building up in his heart.

“A long time ago, I lost to him. So I wanted to win the next time. But it’s impossible now... Ahhh, I can’t escape.” Brain looked up at the night sky. “Damn it all...”

“...Brain.”

What should I do?

What should I do with these thoughts of Gazef?

“Well, let’s see. What am I fretting about, really? I have two choices. To follow his wishes or not. So I’ll have to...win...? Ah, I see.”

There’s only one answer.

Brain broke into a savage smile and thrust Razor Edge toward the sky.

“Ha! Why would I do what you wanted?” Brain roared from the pit of his stomach. “You asshole, you chose death! You took the easy way out! I hope you’re humiliated over there in the next world! I-I’m gonna—I’m gonna surpass you in my own way! Climb! Let’s drink! Booze! We’re gonna go nuts!”

Brain didn’t know what to do.

But he had no interest in inheriting Gazef’s way of doing things and working. He would never best his rival that way.

He knew he would remember Gazef time after time. But for just a moment, he wanted to forget him.

Putting his arm over the shoulder of a bewildered Climb, he forced the young man to join him as he set off walking. His hands felt a tiny bit lighter.

A Brand-new Chapter

A Brand-new Chapter

Everyone was waiting for spring. That was especially true in the farming villages, where they could feel the soil coming back to life, but it was true for those in the royal capital as well. Of course, the way they felt it was by the disappearance of firewood and other heating fees.

But the day spring came to E-Rantel, there was only stillness.

The main road was deserted, as if everyone had died. But inside the houses lining it with their shutters drawn—although looking closely, they were open a crack—the presence of people could be felt. They were peeking outside with bated breath.

It was the day that E-Rantel was transferred to Ainz Ooal Gown and became a city of the Nation of Darkness.

The first castle gate opened, and the bells rang out in welcome.

After an appropriate pause, the second gate opened, and the bells rang again.

Between the second and third gates was the area where most of the people lived.

The reason the residents hadn't fled the city was that they knew that even if they ran, their lives would be hopeless.

Even those who had attained the status of master or craftsman in E-Rantel would have to start over as apprentice in a new city.

In a city with history, vested interests existed as a matter of course. It was only natural that an outsider would start from the lowest level. In other words, even if they went to another city, most people wouldn't be able to find proper work and would spend the rest of their lives in a slum.

Those with nowhere to run to—almost everyone—remained.

But even these people would run if their lives were in danger. Of course they would. What they knew of their new lord—no, king—was that he was horrible.

For instance, he was a caster who massacred the kingdom's army.

For instance, he was cold-blooded and immortal.

For instance, he was a monster who loved bathing in the blood of children.

They had heard all sorts of rumors, none of them good.

That was why they were all hiding behind closed doors, in the shadows of their windows, waiting to catch a glimpse of Ainz Ooal Gown.

Soon, his party came down the main road.

Everyone who saw him was rendered speechless—because he looked exactly as the rumors said.

The first person was fine. At the head of the group was a beautiful woman who shone like the moon.

She wore a snow-white dress and had lustrous black hair and skin like white marble. Her bejeweled appearance was so overwhelming that it left no room for lust or envy. But the horns growing out of her head, the black wings sprouting from her hips, and more than anything, her impossible beauty was proof that she wasn't human.

Following the peerless, goddess-like beauty came soldiers. At that point, the residents shivered.

From the differences in armor, they could tell there were two groups.

To name the first group, perhaps “Knights of Death”?

Each knight carried a tower shield that covered three-quarters of their body in their left hand and a flamberge in their right.

Under ragged raven-black capes, their hulking bodies—well over six feet tall—were covered in full plate armor made of black metal with a pattern like crimson blood vessels running over it. Sharp spikes jutted out here and there, making the suit an embodiment of violence. Their helmets had demon horns and open faces that left the beings' rotting features visible. In their vacant eye sockets, their hatred for living things and anticipation of slaughter burned red.

As a name for the second group, “Warriors of Death” seemed appropriate.

They carried long-handled, single-edge swords and had an array of different weapons on their hips—hand axes, maces, crossbows, whips, short spears. All their equipment had marks that showed they were well used.

They were over six feet tall and armored but lightly. It was unclear what animal's leather it was, but they wore beat-up leather armor and wound curse wraps—bandages with curses written on them—around their arms, face, and so on. Peeking out from beneath the bandages were, like the other group, crumbling features that definitely didn't belong to a living creature.

Every member in the group seemed inordinately powerful, but

when the people saw the palanquin they were carrying, their shock was overwritten by a new awe and forgotten.

The undead seated on it radiated the overwhelming presence of death and gave off a swirling black haze. Behind him shone a black halo.

Everyone knew immediately—this being was Ainz Ooal Gown.

We can't live under a creature like that. This goes far beyond the threat of death. Many of them were convinced of that, but suddenly a door flew open.

Everyone who peered desperately through tiny gaps of cover to see what was happening saw a boy running. He had something clenched in his hand as he raced toward Ainz Ooal Gown's grotesque procession. A deathly pale woman who seemed to be his mother was running after him.

"Give Daddy back!" His young, high-pitched voice echoed horribly loudly. "Give Daddy back, you monster!"

He wound up and threw something. It was a stone.

The little rock he had been grasping flew toward the parade, probably at Ainz Ooal Gown.

Perhaps because the boy had been nervous, the stone fell far short of its target and rolled over the dirt.

Coming after him, the boy's mother looked like she might drop dead at any moment, as though she fully understood what their fate would be. She scooped her boy up from behind, desperately trying to shield him with her own body.

"H-he's just a child! I beg you, please forgive him!"

The beautiful woman smiled in response to the mother's frantic plea.

We're saved. Anyone would think that and feel relief. It was such a gentle, motherly smile.

"It was disrespectful to Lord Ainz. The punishment is death."

When had she taken it out? The beautiful woman was suddenly wielding a gigantic bardiche. Her strength was undoubtedly inhuman.

It was easy to imagine how it would be used, and that imagining could be said to have been correct.

"What a rotten animal you've raised. You should be ashamed as a stock breeder of how meager the price of its meat will be!"

Realizing what their fate would be as the beautiful woman approached, the mother squeezed her son tightly.

"Please! My son, please at least spare my son. I don't care what happens to me! I beg you!"

"What are you talking about? I'm not going to kill you. Lord Ainz is not partial to senseless killing. I won't kill anyone who hasn't committed a crime. Relax and wait for that ground beef in your hands

to be ready... My personal favorite is deep-fried meat patties.”

No one knew how she would kill the boy in his mother’s arms. But although everyone knew the boy’s short life would end in a few seconds, no one rushed out to try to save him.

The onlookers wanted to avoid seeing the coming bloodshed, but they couldn’t tear their eyes away.

Both mother and child seemed bound by the beautiful woman’s ghastly energy—they didn’t move a muscle.

“Regret your ill-mannered actions toward the loftiest one of this world and die.”

The moment she was about to swing her huge weapon, the ground jolted. The source was a giant sword that stuck into the earth between the pitiable pair and the woman.

There was no one in this city who didn’t know that sword—or its owner.

The living legend.

The undefeated warrior.

The great, kind hero.

Upon the arrival of the one person who could save the poor mother and child, everyone shouted the name of the sword’s owner in their minds.

It was the Dark Warrior, Momon.

The man clad in raven-black armor leisurely appeared on the road and pulled the sword out of the earth. He waved it in a huge arc to shake the dirt off. He already had a sword in his other hand, falling into a combat stance as he faced the beautiful woman.

“You’re being awfully rough on a kid who threw a stone. No one’s going to want to marry you.”

“How rude, but when it’s you saying it, I feel fi— Ahem. If someone has been disrespectful to Lord Ainz, it doesn’t matter whether they’re an adult or a child. They must all die.”

“And what if I said I wouldn’t allow that?”

“I would consider it a revolt against the king of this land and crush you.”

“I see. Well, that’s not bad. But don’t think you can take my life so easily. Know this is the place you’ll die; then come at me!”

Momon dexterously brandished his two swords and prepared for battle. His bold—and not only that but commanding—attitude was appropriately heroic.

“You guys, protect Lord Ainz,” the beautiful woman ordered the

warriors who had backed up with the palanquin. Then she held up her bardiche.

The spectators' feeling that Momon could win for sure was negated by the equally intense opposing forces. They knew instinctively that this woman was as powerful a warrior as Momon.

The fighters closed the distance between them slowly, by fractions of a stride. The one who defused the volatile atmosphere was Ainz Ooal Gown himself. Perhaps by magic? He silently flew out of the palanquin and alighted on the ground, then grabbed the beautiful woman's shoulder from behind.

"Lord Ainz!"

Then he brought his face close to the woman's ear and whispered something. Her face melted into a gentle, lovey smile.

"Understood, Lord Ainz. I'll do as you say."

After bowing to Ainz, she pointed the bardiche at Momon again, but there was none of the bloodthirstiness of before.

"...I didn't ask your name. Tell me it now."

"I'm Momon."

"I see. Momon. I ask you: Do you think you can beat us?"

"...No, it'd be impossible. If I went in meaning to die, I could probably only kill one of you."

Hearing that, the people of the city were assailed by despair. Such a great hero could kill only one of the monsters...

"And if I fought at full strength, lots of people would die in the resulting battle. I can't do that."

"What a fool you are. You have such outstanding power, and yet for these weaklings, you would— Oh, I seem to have spoken in vain. Apparently, Lord Ainz has a proposition for you. You should be grateful. Say you surrender to the army of Nazarick."

"Are you out of your mind?"

"How rude. Lord Ainz has no intention of ruling this city through slaughter and despair. It's not as if he gains anything by killing humans, you know. But even if he said that, the people here won't believe him, so you must work at his side."

"...What do you mean?"

"Going forward, there may be others like that imbecile who threw the rock at Lord Ainz. If that happens, take off that person's head. That way, Lord Ainz won't have to make the innocent people of the city suffer. All you need to do is stand watch."

"...I see. So I would serve close to him as an observer?"

"Not quite. As I said, you will kill rebels with your own hands. He's telling you to be a representative of the city, as well as the law enforcer."

"I have no interest in following your evil laws."

“We’re not planning on enacting any that are so evil. So what will you do? If you won’t devote your sword to Lord Ainz, you’re a dangerous individual, meaning I’ll have to kill you now—no matter how many bystanders become involved.”

Momon looked around.

“I was traveling on my way somewhere else. I didn’t plan on becoming anyone’s underling.”

“If that’s your answer, that’s fine. Then shall we begin our death match and wrap up all these humans in the ensuing battle?”

“Wait! Don’t jump to conclusions. I haven’t said what I’m going to do yet. Also, I have a partner. What will happen to her?”

“She can serve with you. What other answer could there be?”

“The old me would have prioritized reaching the destination of my journey, but...I seem to have gotten unexpectedly attached to this city. Will it work for you even if I don’t surrender?”

Ainz approached the woman again and whispered in her ear.

“He says he’ll allow it. Momon, work hard for Lord Ainz.”

“...Got it. Just remember that if you ever make the people of this city suffer for no reason, this sword will take your—both your heads off.”

“...Then if anyone from this city ever tries to revolt against Lord Ainz, take their head off. Even if they’re a child. I’m looking forward to it—to seeing these people rebelling, that is. I can’t wait to see you writhe in agony as you kill them. Well, we’ll be off now. Come along later.”

Ainz Ooal Gown’s party leisurely moved on. Once the unusually long procession had passed and the group wasn’t visible anymore, people poured out of their houses. Had there really been so many to begin with? There was such a surprisingly large crowd, it was enough to make anyone watching wonder.

Many were praising Momon.

Momon was awkwardly gesturing with both hands to calm them down when he heard a dry smack. He turned to look and saw the mother had slapped her son.

“Why would you do that?”

She slapped him again.

Both mother and child were crying.

But she kept slapping him.

Momon grabbed her hand.

“Maybe we could call that enough? I’d like to ask him something.”

“Sir Momon, I’m so sorry my son made trouble for you!”

“Don’t worry about it. More importantly, excuse me. All right, you, don’t cry. I want to talk to you.”

Momon soothed the boy as best he could and asked him why he

did what he did.

Everyone must have thought all the boys wanted to avenge their fathers, but this one said a strange man egged him on, so he thought throwing the stone was the right thing to do.

"I see. Ma'am, you shouldn't scold him anymore. He was probably under the influence of a spell. I'm guessing it's a Theocracy plot to drive Ainz Ooal Gown and me to go against each other."

"...But...why would the Theocracy do that? Don't you think it must be Ainz Ooal Gown's plot? To force you to become his henchman?"

It was the owner of a shop that opened a few years back who spoke, and Momon nodded sincerely.

"I suppose that's another possibility. But that works in our favor if it's true. I'll be standing by near him, watching how he operates. If he seems like he's going to do anything that will harm all of you, I'll slice his head off right away. But in return, please don't rebel against him."

"Why not? With you on our side—"

"Please don't finish that sentence. They're already waiting for it. If you start a rebellion, they'll order me to kill you all—for their own amusement."

Momon spread his arms, facing the people in the street, and stated with confidence, "I can't break that promise I made just now. That's why, as long as they aren't being unreasonable, I want you to accept what they say. If you think anything they ask is unreasonable, please tell me."

Realizing that to Momon, they were all hostages, the people's expressions turned sorrowful.

But Momon gave them a gentle laugh. "Please don't worry too much. Besides, maybe he'll actually be a decent ruler. Let's see how things go. And if the Theocracy has been active, there might be someone trying to incite you to rebel. Please be wary."

There was no way that sat well with any of them.

But no one offered any opposing opinions.

Ainz Ooal Gown was an undead. None of them could trust a dangerous being who hated life. But there wasn't a single person who didn't believe in Momon. And Momon had just given up on his own objective for their sake. It was only natural that they would want to repay his kindness.

The people all agreed with what Momon said, promising they would tell the other people they knew before scattering into the city.

As a result, the rule of E-Rantel changed over more bloodlessly, more peacefully, than the neighboring countries could ever have imagined.

OVERLORD
Character Profiles



JIRCIV RUNE FARLORD EL NIX

HUMANOID

The Fresh Blood Emperor

Position — Emperor of the Baharuth Empire

Residence — The Baharuth Empire's imperial palace

Class Levels — Emperor (normal) — ? lv

High Emperor (normal) — ? lv

Charisma (normal) — ? lv

Etc.

Birthday — 1 Early Wind Moon

Hobby — Learning about other countries
and comparing them to his own

{ personal character }

The empire's young emperor. A genius thoroughbred with the moniker "the Fresh Blood Emperor." He gained complete control over the empire's knights and carried out a purge of the nobles. He's not married, but he has children. Still, he doesn't feel any love for them, and if they turned out to be incompetent and unfit to rule, he would probably have no problem disowning them. He has issues because his mother, the empress, poisoned his father, the previous emperor, and when he became emperor, the first thing he did was execute several of his siblings.

FLUDER PARADYNE

HUMANOID

Triad Caster

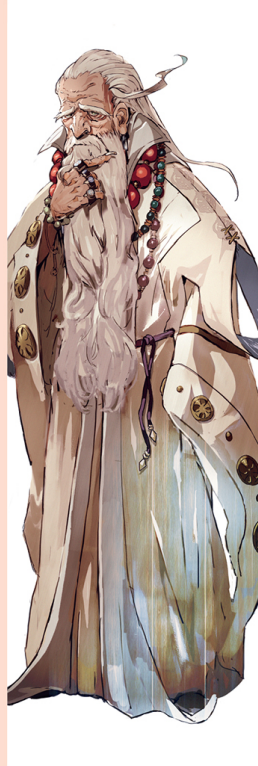
Position — Principal Court Wizard

Residence — The great caster's tower

Class Levels — Wizard — ? lv
 Forbidden Arts Practitioner ? — ? lv
 Bishop — ? lv
 Etc.

Birthday — So long ago he doesn't remember

Hobby — Everything to do with magic



{ personal character }

Those who stand in a realm after overcoming human limits are called heroes, and those who go beyond heroes are called deviants. Fluder is a deviant—one of only four human magic users on the whole continent who have reached the same place. As someone who has reached an inhuman level, he combines three types of magic to develop his own ritual spells and so on, which he uses to extend his life span.



ELIAS BRANDT DALE RAEVEN

HUMANOID

The Ultra-Doting-Parent Great Noble

Position — Great noble in the Re-Estize Kingdom

Residence — His mansion in E-Raebel

Class Levels — High Noble (normal) — ? lv

Sage (normal) — ? lv

Charisma (normal) — ? lv

Etc.

Birthday — 30 Late Fire Moon

Hobby — Everything to do with his kid

personal character

A great noble feared by many in the aristocracy. Incidentally, he's also a man who has said, "I love you," to his wife only twice. The first time was two days after his child was born. The second time was their anniversary around the time their child turned two. The latter was so quick, and he wasn't looking at her face, so it's debatable whether it should be counted or not. The reason he doesn't put his feelings into words is because he thinks, *My wife understands my feelings, so there's no need to say it.*

OVERLORD
Character Profiles

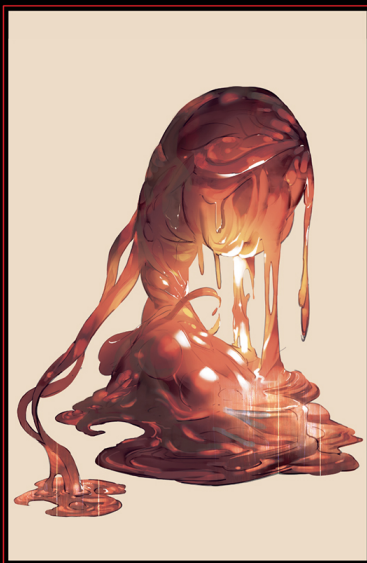
THE
FORTY-ONE
SUPREME
BEINGS

COMPILATION

BUBBLING TEAPOT

GROTESQUE

Mucus Tank



| personal character |

A fairly famous voice actress who often voiced little-girl characters. She normally talked in a bit of a high-pitched voice, but that was also mostly an act. Supposedly, the low voice she used when she was annoyed with Peroroncino was much closer to her real one. Though her other abilities were super-weak, when it came to defense, she could be called ultra-first-rate. She was a skillful player as well as a capable commander. Sometimes, when the whole guild worked together, she would head up one team as a tank.

PERORONCINO

GROTESQUE

Winged Bomber King



| personal character |

"Technology advances first for the military, then gets applied to the sex industry and medicine. That speaks to how great the sex industry is." He was a man who didn't hesitate to say such things and would passionately discuss his eroge recommendations. Later on, many people would see him depressed by his elder sister's appearances. He made a character that specialized in archery and was good at bombardment using ludicrously long-range attack skills, but conversely his combat ability was decreased when fighting in enclosed spaces.

Afterword

To everyone who picked up Volume 9, you must be tired. For some reason, it was another thick, heavy volume.

When I started writing, I'm pretty sure I asked my editor, "I don't have anything to write for this volume, so is it okay if it's over in two hundred pages?" but when I finished writing and printed out the manuscript, I was like, "What's this crazy-thick thing?"

It's mysterious, isn't it?

Truly mysterious. Where did those other two hundred pages come from?

But yeah, pretty soon I'd like to try ending a volume in three hundred pages. Not a two-part story of three hundred pages each, either.

And so for some reason, I don't know why, the next volume will develop in a completely different way from the web novel, so I'm quite terrified, but I'd be happy if you'd stick with me. I'll take the liberty of declaring ahead of time that Volume 10 will be three hundred pages long.

Last week, the manga version of *Overlord* that Hugin Miyama is doing went on sale, and this week, the ninth novel came out. Then next week the *Overlord* anime starts airing, so it's three weeks of nothing but *Overlord*.

So many people have worked with me to create something wonderful (especially hardworking so-bin, about whose various contributions I can't speak without tearing up. I mean, really...I always get the feeling you're wringing your own neck!). I hope you'll all enjoy the manga, novels, and anime.

On to the customary thank-yous.

Thank you, so-bin, for the truly wonderful illustrations and for working so hard on the anime and manga, as if your life depended on

it.

To the designers at Code Design. You not only design the light novels but even did the logo for the anime—and it's an extremely cool logo. And to Murata for working so hard on the maps, and Osako and Ito for proofing in such detail, thank you. To F



Afterword by so-bin

CAN'T BELIEVE WE'RE
ALREADY ON VOLUME 9.
CHECK OUT THE ANIME
AND COMIC, TOO.

So-bin

AINZ ESTABLISHES
A COUNTRY TO
ACHIEVE HIS
OBJECTIVES, BUT
TIMES ARE STILL
TURBULENT. AS
AINZ IS RUNNING
AROUND TO
SOLVE ASSORTED
PROBLEMS, HE
EVENTUALLY SETS
FOOT IN THE
DWARF KINGDOM

IN THE AZERLISIA
MOUNTAINS. WHAT
IN THE WORLD IS
WAITING FOR HIM
THERE—? THE PLOT
DEVELOPS IN NEW
DIRECTIONS 10
IN VOLUME Volume Ten

OVERLORD

Volume 10: The Ruler of Conspiracy

Kugane Maruyama | Illustration by so-bin

Coming soon from  YEN!

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright
Table of Contents
Prologue
Chapter 1 Verbal Warfare
Chapter 2 Preparations for the Battle
Chapter 3 Another Battle
Chapter 4 Massacre
Epilogue
A Brand-new Chapter
Character Profiles
Afterword
Yen Newsletter